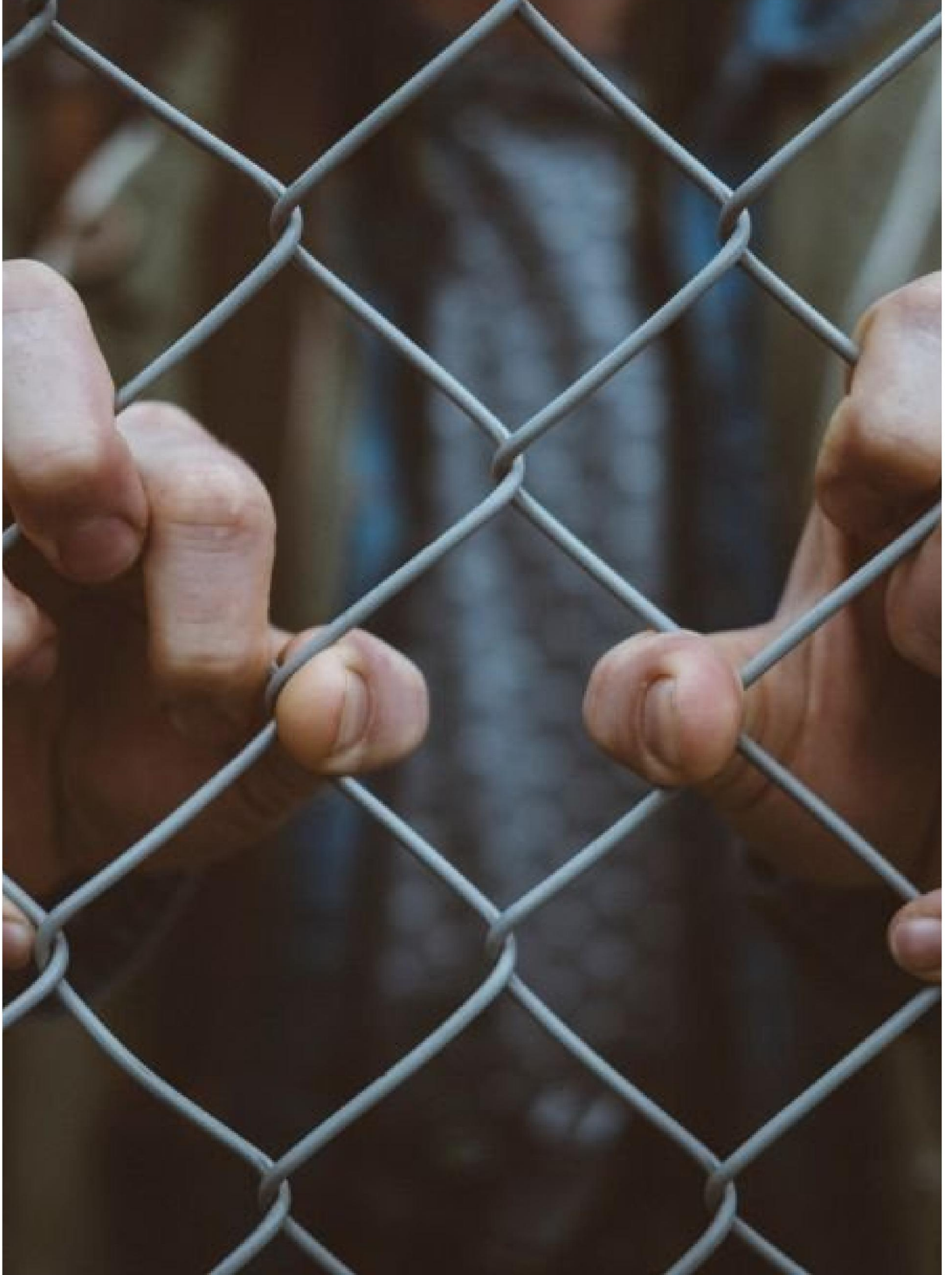


-Wolves-

Saucery



Wolves

by [Saucery](#).

Summary

Peter is falsely accused and sent to jail, where he meets the violent ex-mercenary, Wade.

Or: Prison daddy Deadpool looks after his boy.

Chapter 1

Peter was clad in the garish orange of a traffic cone, but somehow, he got the feeling that wasn't why he was being gawked at. He had the horrid suspicion that it was because he was young, and because he had all his teeth. Or whatever passed for "pretty" around here.

His suspicion was confirmed when a whistle from the upper balcony made him jump.

"Hey, chicken! Wanna lay my eggs?"

Peter ignored the ensuing hoots and hollers, his ears burning. Ignoring them wouldn't suffice once he was in the communal showers, or in the mess hall, or in the exercise yard, or in any public place that wasn't his cell. Even his cell mightn't be safe, if his cellmate turned out to be bigger and meaner than he was.

Almost anyone would be bigger and meaner than Peter was, given that Peter was only here for the crime of intellectual property theft, and even that was a frame-up by Norman Osborn. The heaviest object Peter had ever hefted in his skinny arms was a CPU, and his smarts wouldn't get him far in a world where brute strength reigned supreme.

Unless Peter quickly deciphered the complex power structures that existed within the prison system, and managed to ingratiate himself with a faction that would shelter him, or with a boss high enough in the hierarchy to offer him the same degree of protection.

He tried not to imagine what ingratiating himself would involve. Maybe he could offer his more cerebral skills as a bargaining point. Not that he wanted to commit any crimes—he wasn't a criminal—but surely hacking the computer network for simple and relatively harmless reasons, such as downloading pornography for sexually frustrated prisoners or sourcing contraband such as cigarettes and alcohol from outside the prison, wouldn't trouble his conscience overmuch. Or make him feel like he belonged here. Which he didn't. All he had to do now was to ensure that he never would.

The guard leading him to his cell stopped in front of a massive steel door with no window hatch whatsoever. The other doors had hatches. Peter had the creeping sense that this was not a good sign.

"Oh, my," said the guy from the opposite cell, in a twangy Texan drawl. "A little lamb for the wolf, huh? Do they think that's gonna calm him down?" He winked at Peter. "You better pray you're his type, boy."

"Shut the hell up," barked the guard, as Peter's heart sank.

The guard—whose badge bore the name George Yaxley—gripped the baton strapped to his waist, white-knuckled, clearly bracing himself before opening the cell. That couldn't be a good sign, either.

Yaxley pressed a series of buttons on the keypad on the outside wall, a series Peter promptly memorized, on autopilot. Yaxley caught Peter looking.

"Don't bother," he said. "The computer changes the password every six hours. You won't have the opportunity to use this again."

But it's a computer, Peter thought to himself. If it's a computer, I can hack into it. And reprogram it. Wait, why was he even considering that? Breaking out would be a real crime, and he wouldn't have a future if he did it. If he hung in there for the eight years he was sentenced, he'd still have more of a life left than if he—

Spent those eight years getting fucked?

Shit.

The metal door swung inwards with a creak, and Peter didn't even have the chance to freak out about stepping into his very own personal torture chamber, because Yaxley just shoved him in and slammed the door shut before Peter could make any independent movement of his own.

"New roommate, Deadpool," the guard announced through the door, and fled in an audible hurry.

Coward.

Peter took a deep breath and focused.

There... was a man in the cell.

Well, of course there was a man in the cell. Not like there'd be a leprechaun. Although at least a leprechaun would be too small to overpower him, and maybe Peter's rambling subconscious was just trying to dream up a situation in which he *wouldn't* get brutally sodomized on the regular, but—

He had to stop panicking.

He took another deep breath.

The man lounging on the only chair in the room had a bunch of playing cards in one hand, with his other arm slung casually across the back of the chair. The sole table in the room also had playing cards on it, despite there being no opponent, and Peter felt a frisson of disbelief at the surreal revelation that his potential rapist was playing solitaire.

“Why, hello,” said the prisoner—Deadpool? What an alarming nickname—and studied his cards, not even bothering to glance up at his new cellmate. He was covered in hideous scars. Rather, the scars covered him, because there wasn’t a single visible patch of unscarred skin on a body that was otherwise heavily muscled and intimidatingly tall. It was like he’d been burned, shot and stabbed in every conceivable way, and yet he was, unbelievably, alive. Peter didn’t dare to dwell on how strong that must make him. “Are you supposed to be my bribe for behaving myself? An actual roommate after an eon of solitude?”

Peter realized that he had plastered himself to the door like a pancake. A very frightened pancake. He slowly unplastered himself, because heck if he was going to act the coward like that guard just did.

Deadpool looked up at him at last.

Peter stood there, petrified, a deer in the proverbial headlights. Deadpool’s eyes were *intense*, chillingly manic and feral, but at the same time, oddly playful. It was a jarring combination. An unnerving combination. Like the guy would laugh while pulling a knife on someone.

“Goddamn,” Deadpool said, surveying Peter from head to foot. “They must really want me to behave. Did they buy you off some Russian bride website? With words like

'delicate' and 'waif' in the description?" He got up, putting aside his cards, and Peter flinched.

Deadpool... paused. And sat back down.

"Relax, kid. I'm not into folks that aren't into me. Which is most folks, let's be honest. You any good at playing cards?"

Peter stared.

"Eh, don't worry. You'll be outta here when they find out I didn't bang you. I wonder how many adorable twinkles they'll throw at me before they figure out I'm not into assault." Deadpool grinned. "Violent assault, sure. Sexual assault? Not so much."

"Some kinds of assault are both," Peter blurted, and then winced at his own words.

Deadpool raised an eyebrow. "Is that what you're in for? Don't reckon you could hurt a fly, though."

"I'm—I'm not a rapist!"

"Lucky for you. 'Cause if you were, I'd have to kill ya."

And Peter was back to staring.

Deadpool shrugged. "'S what I do."

"Kill rapists?"

"And child molesters. And drug dealers that peddle to minors. And domestic abusers."

"Is that what *you're* in for?"

"Yep," Deadpool said cheerfully. "If they deserve to die, I kill 'em. I've helped lower the criminal population of the city by at least a fifth. The government oughta thank me for all the money I've saved them."

"You're a vigilante serial killer." Peter made himself say it, as if saying it would make it plausible, but it sounded like the plot of a comic book. A very badly written comic book.

"Used to be a professional serial killer with vigilante ambitions. Became a bonafide vigilante just before getting arrested. Totally worth it."

"By your logic, don't you deserve to die, as well?"

"Not for those reasons. And they're the worst ones."

"You're a hypocrite."

It was Deadpool's turn to stare. "That took guts to say," he marveled. "You ain't scared of me?"

"I'm shaking in my boots." Peter blinked down at his feet, which were, in fact, quaking. "Shoes. Shaking in my ugly prison shoes."

"But you still said what you were thinking."

"I'm not a coward."

"Not fond of cowards, I take it?"

"I got framed by one."

"Claiming innocence? Haven't heard that excuse in a while. You don't look it, kid, but you wouldn't be in a maximum security prison for just any crime."

"You would be if the bastard framing you owned every judge in every county in every state in this country."

Deadpool hummed. "There's a tragic backstory there, but I only have you for, like, eleven hours, or however many hours there are until tomorrow. So, you wanna play cards, or what?"

Peter wasn't up to whatever "or what" was, so he inched closer to Deadpool and said: "Fair warning, I'm a genius. And I won't throw a game."

Deadpool squinted up at him, a weird smile pulling at his mouth. "You ever actually played poker, kid?"

"Peter. The name's Peter."

"You ever played poker, Petey?"

"No."

"Then you'll learn intelligence is only half of the game. Being able to bluff is the other half. And I'm willing to bet you can't bluff your way out of a paper bag."

That stung, because it was that very personality trait—gullibility—that had made Peter such easy prey for Osborn. Peter huffed, and to his surprise, Deadpool abandoned his chair, sitting cross-legged on the floor so that Peter could sit, too.

A *courteous* vigilante serial killer. What the hell?

Deadpool began shuffling the cards, all efficient and businesslike. "Now, the first rule of poker is..."

Peter settled down, his legs also crossed, the adrenaline that had ratcheted up his heartbeat beginning to die down. He couldn't trust that this whackjob wouldn't kill him, or attack him when convenient. But there was a strange quality to Deadpool, something electric and viciously *free*, like he thrived on defying people's expectations.

Peter hoped Deadpool would defy his.

Chapter 2

By the next morning, Peter knew the following things about Deadpool: that his name was Wade, that he hadn't gotten laid in seven years, that he still got sad about his ex-girlfriend dumping him while he was in the clink, that he had a kill-count of one-hundred-and-twenty-eight, five of which were added to his tally after he was incarcerated, and that he'd been in solitary for six continuous years because of a loophole in prison law that had only recently been reformed.

The lawyer responsible for said reform was Wade's aforementioned ex-girlfriend, Vanessa, who was a hotshot defense attorney and a member of [Solitary Watch](#), an activist organization advocating for the rights of prisoners in solitary confinement. She'd presented Wade's case to the Supreme Court in a landmark ruling that had forced the Grantham Correctional Facility to release Wade into the general prison population precisely three days ago, with a stern reprimand forbidding them from putting Wade—or anyone else—in solitary for more than a month at a stretch.

Unfortunately, Wade's release left Grantham with the problem of how to prevent Wade from killing or maiming his fellow inmates like he'd done *before* his six-year stint in solitary, which was why they'd concluded that giving Wade a cute pet would... distract him? Burn off some of that feral, deadly energy with good old-fashioned non-consensual sex? Argh. Just attempting to understand their motivations gave Peter a headache.

In addition to the above details, Peter now knew things about Wade that only playing card games with somebody could reveal: that Wade was canny, that he didn't have enough of an ego to get upset when he lost, and that he cheated whenever possible, not to win but to amuse himself by tripping up his opponent. Also, Wade flirted at the frequency of 1.39 indecent proposals per 2 sentences, but he'd stopped doing it when Peter said the flirting was making him uncomfortable.

He'd stopped.

He hadn't stopped when his numerous victims screamed and pleaded for their lives, but he'd stopped when "a sweet, doe-eyed boy" (Wade's description, not Peter's) asked Wade to maybe please not refer to genitalia in his presence? Please?

Wade was the biggest walking contradiction Peter had ever seen. Wade would probably be tempted to make a dick joke about the term "biggest," though, so Peter didn't share his opinion.

"You can just ask," Wade said, cracking a yawn as the guards on the early shift went around doing the pre-breakfast head-count, their yelling muffled through the steel door. "Y'know, whether I was as unhinged before solitary as I am after solitary."

Peter rubbed his eyes. "Were you?" he asked sleepily. They'd fallen asleep partway between the thirty-fifth game and the thirty-sixth, the cards of the latter in an un-dealt pile beside Wade's elbow.

"Nah. I mean, solitary didn't make me better, but it didn't make me worse, either. I was always used to talking to myself. So!" Wade clapped his hands. "Breakfast! Your

freedom awaits! If we eat at different tables, the guards will assume we didn't do the nasty, and you'll be reassigned by lunch."

Peter felt a bizarre surge of nervousness. Somehow, he doubted the rest of the inmates shared Wade's peculiar brand of chivalry. What if Peter *did* get assigned to a cellmate hellbent on deflowering him? He couldn't be lucky twice in a row, could he?

When they were let out for breakfast, Peter shadowed Wade to the mess hall, which resembled a pool of piranhas. Orange, jeering piranhas. Intent on devouring Peter.

"Well!" Wade waved merrily at Peter. "Bye-bye, Pe—"

Peter hung onto the back of Wade's shirt. Tightly.

"Er. Guess I should. Show you how to line up for breakfast? It's an advanced skill. Totally requires a demonstration. And as a reward for learning this important survival skill, you get food! Not that it's food. It's piles of indistinguishable mulch. The vaguely grey-green mulch is the peas. The vaguely grey-brown mulch is... I try not to think about what it is. Eventually, you'll learn how to tell 'em apart. Hell, you might even write a taxonomy book about 'em."

Peter stuck close to Wade as they joined the rather depressed line of convicts leading to vats of equally depressed-looking food. "You're familiar with taxonomy?"

"I may act like a dumbass, but... No, wait, I *am* a dumbass. You're genius enough for the both of us, Petey."

The lady ladling out servings from the kitchen alcove was the most horrifyingly troll-like being Peter had seen outside

of a Harry Potter movie, who smiled—horrifically—when Peter stuttered a high-pitched “thank you.”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” Wade said. “She’s even scarier than she looks.”

Wade clomped happily to a table—which promptly emptied—and began eating after plonking himself down on the bench. Peter copied him, trailing Wade like a miniature pilot fish swimming alongside a shark.

Wade looked askance when Peter joined him, waggling his eyebrows as if to say, *Weren’t you supposed to be eating somewhere else?*

Peter wasn’t sure he should be eating somewhere else. Wade hadn’t touched him since they’d entered the hall, and given the unholy sparks of hope beginning to light up in the other prisoners’ eyes, Peter was starting to get that this was A Big Deal. With capitals, and everything.

The gazes of the prisoners lingered on Peter with increasing boldness, and some of the men—particularly those behind Wade and thus out of his sight—were even emboldened enough to do more than look. A middle-aged, balding man smirked at Peter while making a complicated gesture that was likely a suggestion that he and Peter become intimate in ways involving multiple orifices.

Oh, no.

Peter recalled what Wade had said about bluffing. About how you couldn’t win without bluffing.

Which was why, when Peter asked Wade to pass the pepper and Wade absent-mindedly complied, Peter said softly: “Thanks, Daddy.”

Wade froze. His fork screeched to a halt on his plastic plate.

Everybody else froze, too. Only to relax, all at once, as if a potential civil war had been averted. After all, there'd be no fighting over Peter if Peter was Wade's. Because the top dog of this *Lord of the Flies* pseudo-society would practically have to claim the prison's newest boy-toy, wouldn't he?

The mean-faced bastards who'd been circling Peter like wolves abruptly found their own breakfasts very interesting, sitting down and digging in. There were sighs of disappointment from the guys who'd been gunning for Peter, but even they appeared to agree that Peter calling Wade "Daddy" meant that all was right with the world. The celestial order had been restored.

"Um," squeaked Wade, as if Peter himself were a celestial body that had crash-landed in Wade's mashed potatoes. "Ha ha. What?"

Peter gathered up his courage, abandoned his tray and swung sideways on the bench, until he was straddling Wade's lap.

Wade dropped his fork.

"Play along," Peter whispered, his lips brushing Wade's ear.

Wade was frozen again, doing his best impression of a pillar of salt. Eventually, he whispered back, hoarsely: "Play along with *what?*"

"If I go back out there unclaimed by you, I'll be fair game for every single evil pervert in this hall, and I'll get passed

around until someone reckons I'm worth the trouble of fighting off all the other assholes."

"Nobody fights assholes off, in here. They want to be *in* assholes."

"My point exactly."

Wade turned his face until it wasn't—quite—buried in Peter's neck. Peter was frankly stunned that Wade still wasn't taking advantage of this opportunity to establish sexual contact. Wade could even excuse it as being part of their charade. But he didn't. There were a few crucial millimeters between his mouth and Peter's throat, millimeters that Wade seemed to have no intention of bridging. "You're terrifying," Wade said. It sounded like a compliment.

"No, this whole freaking place is terrifying. I'm just trying to get by." Peter exhaled shakily. He had to say it. He *had* to. Wade's apparent idealism when it came to not taking advantage of people wouldn't outlast this playacting, or outweigh the fact that Wade hadn't dipped his wick in a decade. Peter couldn't reasonably demand that he help Peter for nothing. Besides, Peter had known it might come to this, hadn't he? When he'd been sentenced to prison, and at his age? "I wouldn't—wouldn't mind if—sometimes, that is, as long as it's non-penetrative—"

"Kid." And suddenly, Wade's voice was squeak-free, solid as a brick and just as immovable. "I'm not gonna charge you a sex fee just because you need a protector. If you need one, you've got one. No questions asked. You don't have to take this little masquerade back with us to our cell."

"Are you..." Peter goggled with amazement. "Are you saying you're okay with pretending to nail me without actually

nailing me?"

"If you've decided that's what you've gotta do to stay intact in this junkyard, then, yeah. Why not?" A hint of amusement lightened Wade's tone. "That, and I've never met anybody as unpredictable as you. This is gonna be fun."

Wade thought *Peter* was unpredictable? Wade? "Can't say that's much of a compliment. Compared to all those years you spent in solitary, even farming cabbages would be fun."

"That's the spirit!" Wade forgot to whisper, but those who overheard likely interpreted it as Wade accepting a blowjob. There was still a group of tattooed skinheads leering at Peter creepily, however, like they figured that if they ganged together, they might convince Wade to give Peter up. Like maybe Wade didn't value Peter enough to take on the headache of fighting an entire group. Like Wade wasn't being territorial enough to convince them to back the fuck off.

"Spank my ass," Peter said, still *sotto voce*, as Wade reenacted his freezing routine.

"Uh. Wha—"

"Please."

Wade closed his eyes—as if he was physically pained—and brought his broad, hard palm down on Peter's ass, but so gently that Peter didn't wince like he'd been expecting to. "Is that enough for you, you li'l demon?"

Peter met the gazes of the skinheads over Wade's shoulder. "Harder."

Wade grumbled something about tall orders and *did* make Peter wince, this time. The audible impact of the slap rocked Peter forward against Wade and made tears spring up in Peter's eyes. "Sorry," Wade mumbled, but Peter shook his head.

"That oughta do it," Peter said, relief flooding him when even the most persistent of his "suitors" scowled and glanced away. Including the skinheads. "If they sense the slightest lack of, um, enthusiasm in your fondness for me, they'll try to... fill the gap themselves."

There was a beat of silence.

"Did you seriously just say that?" Wade said, the question emerging distinctly strangled. "Fill the gap? *Seriously?*"

Peter slid off Wade's lap and sat back down on his now-throbbing behind, burying his flaming face in his hands. He hated it when he punned involuntarily. It had always been an embarrassing habit of his, especially when he was nervous. "Shut up," he said, as Wade threw his head back and laughed.

Chapter 3

It hurt seeing Aunt May through a plastic pane. Peter would never see her again without a barrier between them—not for eight years, anyhow, but right now, eight years felt like forever. He'd never hug her again. He'd never smell her detergent-and-vanilla scent, never feel the softness of her old, overused cardigans, never hear her calling him down for breakfast, never hear her chuckle over how he still watched Saturday cartoons.

And what hurt the most? Was how *she* was thinking the same things, looking back at Peter through the screen. It hurt to see that she clearly hadn't slept in ages, that despite her carefully combed hair and Sunday best, her spirit was all but broken. She was holding herself together and pretending to be strong for Peter's sake, but Peter recognized the bruised purple of the delicate, wrinkled skin beneath her tired eyes, eyes reddened by tears and sleeplessness. She'd been like that after Uncle Ben had died.

She'd already lost a husband. Now, she had lost a son.

But Peter was still alive. Perhaps that was crueler, that they were being kept apart, but not by something as insurmountable as death. The years stretched before them like a desert, seemingly unending, barren of each other's company or comfort. Perhaps it was crueler that Aunt May could hope to hold him again, to bake him her famous apple pie, to have him in her life as anything but a hole in her heart.

No, Peter was being ridiculous. It was a kindness that he was still alive, that Aunt May didn't have to mourn a more final loss. They would be reunited when he was free. He wouldn't be the same Peter she had known before he'd gone to jail, but he'd still be *her* Peter. He always would be.

"Hi, Aunt May," Peter said, into the green two-way phone whose handle was greasy with the fingerprints of hundreds of prisoners. His voice cracked.

"Hi, sweetie." Aunt May's knuckles were white around her own receiver. "Where did you get that?"

Peter was briefly confused, but then he saw her focusing on his wrist. Where there was a very large handprint. Wade's handprint, to be precise. Peter had demanded Wade leave it on him as a charm to protect him on the path between their cell and the visiting room. He'd forgotten that Aunt May would also wind up seeing it, not just the other inmates. "Oh," Peter said, horrified, hating that the sleeves of these horrid prison shirts were short, that he couldn't hide the mark or gloss over it as being of no significance. "Um. Nowhere."

"Peter—"

"Can we... Can we please not have The Talk again? The prison version of it, anyway, that you gave me before I got

sent away? I almost passed out when you started lecturing me on the complications of consent.”

“Honey,” Aunt May said, low and determined, “you will always, *always* have me. No matter what happens to you, or is done to you. And you... You can tell me anything. Please tell me. It’s—it’s the only way I can still be with you, still help you—” Aunt May’s hand shook, and she had to grip the phone even tighter to prevent dropping it. “All I can do is listen,” she continued. “You might be compelled to protect me from the reality of what you’re going through, but don’t. For both our sakes, don’t. Just... Just tell me whatever you need to tell me. I won’t judge. I won’t pull away. I’ll never pull away from you.”

What Peter couldn’t explain was that he needed her to stay innocent, needed her to be ignorant of what he was going through. He needed her visits to be time away from jail and everything in it, not a rehashing of humiliating experiences he’d rather forget. What he needed from Aunt May was a glimpse into what life had been like before prison, and what it might be like again, after prison. What he needed the visiting room to be wasn’t a confessional, but a safe space where he was no longer Peter Parker, Convicted Criminal, just Peter Parker, Nerdy Nephew. He needed a safe space to be who he was, and not what prison was turning him into.

Of course, being Aunt May, she somehow saw all of that in his expression, and sighed. “I’m sorry. I was being intrusive. You don’t have to tell me. I just... I’m so useless, out here, unable to do even one damned thing for you.”

“*Damned?*” Peter’s lips twitched into a smile. A somewhat wobbly smile, but a smile nonetheless. “Did you just swear,

Aunt May? For shame. I've only been in jail a couple days, and I'm already a bad influence."

"Peter." Aunt May's lips were twitching, too. "You couldn't be a bad influence if you tried."

I'm influencing an otherwise nice serial killer into committing lewd acts he wouldn't be committing if I weren't asking for them. Not that Peter could share that with Aunt May. And not because she couldn't handle it, but because she'd probably smuggle herself and a meat cleaver into the prison in order to chop off Wade's balls. Politely chop off Wade's balls. Aunt May was unfailingly polite. "I've... found a friend?" That should reassure her. "Maybe?"

"You don't sound very confident."

"My cellmate's an okay guy."

Aunt May quirked an eyebrow. She was still pale, but she'd evidently resolved to humor Peter in his attempt at normalizing what was happening to him, like he was in a college dorm with a wacky roommate, and not in a maximum security prison with a former assassin obsessed with killing fellow criminals according to some weird personal code. "Just 'okay'? What a ringing endorsement."

"He's got more morals than the others, at least. And he's protective of me."

Aunt May's eyes narrowed. "Why is he protective of you?"

"Not because of sexual favors!" Peter said hurriedly, then winced at saying 'sexual favors' in front of his aunt. "He's... He's kind of totally against that, actually." *As in, he murders people for it.*

“Is he?” Aunt May relaxed. “That’s good.”

Their conversation branched off into other topics, like Gwen saying that she’d be visiting Peter soon, and Norman Osborn spewing bullshit to the media to defend the crimes of his son, Harry. The *Daily Bugle* was the sole bastion of resistance against Harry’s narrative of rich-boy privilege, and wasn’t buckling under the pressure of being boycotted by any and all advertisers related to Oscorp, but Peter wondered how long they’d be able to resist a threatened shutdown. As it was said in the press: No advertising, no income.

When Aunt May left, it was as though she was taking a part of Peter with her—the best and the sweetest part, and what remained was a bitter husk.

The exercise yard—or, as Peter had dubbed it, the graveyard—was simultaneously the most dangerous place in the prison and the most hilarious place. It was hilarious because it was like a bloody, brutal version of high school, and Peter, ever the outsider, had thought high school was brutal enough. But no, here the cliques were prepared to slaughter each other, and every movement or phrase seemed charged with a seething tension, with violence about to erupt.

Wade did weights while Peter hovered nervously with a sweaty towel, waiting on his apparent master. He was trying to decipher the sociopolitical ramifications of the racist skinheads playing particularly rough basketball with the Irish mafia. The men of the Mexican cartel egged them

on, cheering anybody who landed an elbow in anybody else's guts, but it was the Irish who were winning, with a rangy, Groot-like giant nailing dunk after dunk.

What Peter hadn't counted on was that, after winning the game, Pseudo-Groot would decide that his victory had earned him the right to mess with Peter. It was crazy, the things testosterone could make a man do. Like make him forget that Wade owned this joint.

As Pseudo-Groot swaggered toward him, Peter raised the towel like a matador would before a bull, but Pseudo-Groot only snatched it from him to towel himself dry. Ew. Second-hand sweat. Wade had mopped his brow with the same towel.

Wade slowly lowered his gazillion-pound bar, but Pseudo-Groot's eyes were fixed on Peter, so maybe he didn't notice the quiet menace making the very *air* behind Peter vibrate.

"Urk," said Peter, vocal chords choosing to fail him at the exact moment he should've said, *Get away, now, while you still can!*

"Jesus, you're as cute as they come, aren't you?" said Pseudo-Groot, lifting his disgusting, grotty towel to Peter's face and caressing him with it while Peter gagged. Pseudo-Groot dragged the towel downward, over Peter's chest and to his crotch, and said, in an Irish drawl that was somehow absolutely filthy: "Speaking of coming, do you even get to come, when your daddy does you? I bet he can't make your pussy cream for him like I could. Whaddaya say?" A vile, piggish snigger. "Not that it matters what you say. Bet you squirt harder when you don't want it."

Before Peter could answer, a blur slammed into Pseudo-Groot and bore him to the ground—a blur that resolved

itself into none other than Wade Wilson, who had a fist bearing down on Pseudo-Groot's trachea, gradually crushing it.

"Care to say that again?" Wade said mildly.

Pseudo-Groot choked. And struggled. And choked some more. He might've been taller than Wade, but he obviously wasn't stronger, because Wade simply didn't budge, his powerful legs bracketing Pseudo-Groot's thrashing body and keeping it trapped.

Peter glanced around wildly, but the guards stationed beyond the barbed-wire enclosure weren't taking any action to save a life. If anything, they looked *expectant*, and Peter—

Peter understood what was transpiring, in a flash so like lightning that the realization burned through him.

They were entrapping Wade. They wouldn't stop Wade from doing a damn thing.

Which meant Peter had to do it, instead.

As Pseudo-Groot's struggles weakened, Peter launched himself onto Wade's back, wrapping his arms around Wade's chest and saying: "Wade, stop. Wade. Stop. Please. You don't—you don't wanna do this."

"Oh, but I really, really do." Wade's features were stark, feral, starved, nothing like the vaguely charming demeanor he normally projected, and his voice was both silky and utterly *vicious*. "It's been a while since I got my fix."

"F-first," Peter said frantically, desperate to interrupt Wade's berserker rage, "first of all, it's deeply disturbing

that you're addicted to homicide, and secondly, what do you suppose will happen to me if you go into solitary?"

Wade... paused.

Pseudo-Groot gurgled.

"Four weeks, Wade. That's the maximum period they could lock you up for. And the new rules state that nothing short of hospitalizing an inmate can land you in solitary. So if you beat up this dude any more and he goes into the infirmary, *you* go into solitary. And I'm left out here. Alone."

The inexorable descent of Wade's fist reversed itself. Pseudo-Groot batted at Wade feebly and rolled to the side, wheezing, while the rest of the Irish goons rushed forward to reclaim him, even though they hadn't had the courage to intervene earlier. Well, they certainly didn't deserve the "SQUAD GOALS" T-shirt they'd been pretending to deserve during that basketball game.

(It wasn't a real T-shirt that was up for grabs. It was just a funny image Peter had dreamt up, because his brain tended to ramble when it was panicked. And it was very, very panicked.)

Wade was dusting off his knees as he stood, surveying the yard and its inhabitants with a deceptively genial eye. They all, without exception, shrank back. "I once kept a Tamagotchi alive for 67 days. I'm sure I can do the same for you."

"And what happens after 67 days?"

"Let's not think about that, shall we?" Wade was abruptly his usual, friendly self. He was smiling ear-to-ear as he

clapped Peter on the back, and Peter stumbled, his heart still pounding.

"This is why they gave me to you," Peter said, hushed and appalled. "I'd be your motivation to control your behavior, or I'd be your reason to just *snap* and give them an excuse to put you in solitary. Over and over again." The deduction sickened him, as did the notion that Wade might doubt him. "You don't... You don't suspect I'm their accomplice, do you? That they offered me a deal for a shorter sentence as long as I slept with you and, and manipulated you?"

The sharpness returned to Wade's eyes, and Peter quailed, but then that sharpness was gone. "Petey, lemme tell you a secret." Wade leaned in, confidential and earnest. "I can smell lies."

Peter blinked. "Wade. That's what psychiatrists call an olfactory hallucination."

"Oooh, you're sassing me again. You must be feeling better. But no, I ain't fronting, it's practically my superpower. I can smell lies. And you don't smell like a lie."

"I resent the accusation that I smell," Peter scoffed, before giving in and asking, "So what do I smell like?"

"The truth." Wade's hand rose, as if to hold Peter's, but when Peter flinched, Wade withdrew. "The painful truth, even." Wade's mouth twisted with self-hatred. "I scared you. Sorry."

"You didn't—" No, that *would* be a lie. Wade had definitely scared him. But what Peter couldn't discern was whether he'd been scared of Wade himself, or scared of losing the protection Wade provided. Which made Peter feel like a conniving jerk, so he just patted Wade's shoulder gingerly,

like he was conveying to Wade that Wade didn't frighten him all that much.

Wade went still, head slightly bowed, and Peter had the distinct impression of being a lion-tamer petting a ferocious animal. That shoulder was enormous, a mass of bunched-up muscle that rippled beneath Peter's touch.

"That's it, children, playtime's over." The chief guard sauntered up to the fence and unlocked the gate leading back into the dreary, gray-painted prison building they'd all been so eager to escape. As the prisoners piled back in, the guard smirked at Wade and said, "You've changed, Deadpool. This pretty little leash is wound tight around your neck, huh? Or is it around your dick?"

"I resent the accusation of being bondage equipment even *more*," Peter said to Wade as the guard wandered off, and Wade chortled, ruffling Peter's hair.

This time, Peter didn't flinch.

He refused to.

Chapter 4

Nudity wasn't something Peter had ever been comfortable with. Even in his furtive, pre-prison fantasies of dating and making love to a girl, he'd shied away from the fact that he'd have to get naked at some point. His body wasn't anything to write home about, thin and bony and embarrassingly fragile as it was, and he knew that nobody would ever want to see it, much less touch it.

How wrong he'd been. Now, he wished the men around him didn't want to see him. Or touch him.

The jail's communal shower was nothing more than a display case, the water that sheeted down on Peter as translucent as glass, slicking his hair to his forehead as he tilted it up into the spray. He hoped that blinding himself with the deluge would give him the illusion of privacy, the illusion that he wasn't being watched by every wannabe voyeur in the room, their gazes as heavy and palpable as a hundred greedy hands.

Wade tended to angle himself so that *his* shape half-concealed Peter's, but that wasn't of much use, given that it only titillated the others. Necks craned to catch flashes of Peter's form, not entirely eclipsed by Wade's. Darting, hungry eyes followed every pass of the dry, unforgiving soap over Peter's skin, and Peter turning away from them only encouraged them. It galled Peter that his unwillingness to expose himself was being perceived as submissive.

Which was why, after Wade's display of savagery in the exercise yard had begun to lose its value as a deterrent—as all displays invariably did, requiring new displays every week—Peter resolved to take charge of how his body was perceived. If he couldn't hide it, then he would exploit it for his own gain.

Peter still found it counterintuitive to consider his body a thing that was coveted, but if Peter could convince those that coveted it that it was beyond their coveting, it would be worth it.

Wouldn't it?

At last, Peter would be in control of his performance on the stage, even if he couldn't control the stage itself, or the cast of degenerate characters surrounding him. Besides, he couldn't get what Pseudo-Groot had said out of his head—that Wade couldn't please Peter sexually, and that Peter wasn't in this arrangement with Wade because he was getting any pleasure out of it, but because he was being forced.

Peter's lack of visible commitment to Wade was fanning the flames of speculation, and would inevitably inspire many Pseudo-Groots to approach Peter, hoping that Peter

would... what? Sneak away from Wade for some nookie of his own? Appreciate that they were better in the sack? Why were jerks always so confident they were amazing at sex, anyway? It must be because their egos were bigger than their dicks.

Wade didn't have that problem. Which was fortunate for Peter, or he'd be getting regularly rogered by his cellmate. His generously-endowed cellmate.

This was an opportunity for Peter to demonstrate his sincerity. Wade had demonstrated his "interest" in Peter often enough, but Peter—aside from that isolated lap-straddling episode a month ago—hadn't displayed any interest of his own.

Until today. Today, Peter would take the initiative.

Partway through their typical shower, with Wade conspiring to move such that Peter was partially shielded by his bulk, Peter ducked under Wade's arm and emerged into the open.

Wade peered down at him, puzzled, and shifted to cover Peter *again*, like the world's musciest umbrella. But Peter didn't crawl back into Wade's shelter. He brought his bar of soap up, and up, and up, till it rested on Wade's left pectoral.

"Please," Peter said for the benefit of their witnesses, looking directly at Wade. "Let me."

Wade goggled at him. As the rushing of water drowned out any sounds from around them, Peter could almost believe that they were on their own, in private, and that this was a man Peter had picked up at a club—another furtive fantasy he'd never gotten to fulfill, and likely never would. He'd

have to pretend that Wade was his type, that they'd been on a fun date, and that they were showering together in Wade's apartment before falling into bed.

It was a scenario that seemed oddly plausible with Wade's eyes wide and startlingly vulnerable above him, with the concerned pinch at the corner of Wade's upper lip, the *Are you sure?* radiating off Wade like a subliminal message.

"Let me," Peter repeated, more breathlessly than he'd planned. He swept the soap sideways, over Wade's chest, blushing when his thumb grazed Wade's nipple and Wade jolted.

Wade grabbed Peter's wrist. "Peter," he warned, but halted when Peter carefully rotated his wrist within Wade's grasp, leaning in to lick Wade's knuckles. Asking. Telling. Showing.

Wade released him.

Peter exhaled in relief, continuing to soap Wade's torso, his fingers slipping along scar-tissue and muscle and searingly hot flesh, hotter than the water sluicing down on them. When Peter was finished, he began to kneel, intending to soap Wade's legs, but Wade stopped him.

Wade was breathing fast, and Peter didn't have to glance downward to know that Wade was getting hard. Peter could *feel* it, a blunt, unfamiliar nudge against his thigh, and there was a sudden, terrified roaring in his ears, his pulse even louder than the shower they were under. His own breathing ratcheted up to match Wade's, and he realized, with a dazed, distant sort of disbelief, that he was getting hard, too.

This couldn't be happening. This was *insane*. This was—

This was Peter attempting to reclaim his own body. Was it any wonder that it was responding?

It's simple stimulus, Peter told himself. *Just stimulus, that's all. It'd happen with anyone.*

"Not now," Wade rasped, which made no sense until Peter remembered that Wade hadn't allowed him to kneel. "Up here," Wade said thickly. "Stay up here."

Oh. Wade was preventing Peter from putting himself in a position where he might be pressured into performing fellatio. That was what Peter inferred, anyhow, and he was grateful for Wade's foresight, so he did as Wade had commanded and stayed upright.

Peter let the soap fall to the floor and ran both palms down Wade's midriff, the abs there flexing in response. He dug his nails lightly into Wade's hips, which juddered, and Peter permitted his own hips to arch, narrowly missing pressing their erections together. That, Peter didn't want to do with an audience. *Or at all*, Peter reminded himself.

As Peter's fingertips slid across Wade's scars, some of which appeared to be particularly sensitive, Peter kept his attention on Wade. Wade returned it, his eyes darkening, gaining a depth and an intensity that was mesmerizing.

They weren't even—

What were they doing? What was Peter doing? It was as though his identity was being stripped from him with every second he persisted in doing what he was doing, in *letting Wade look into him* as he did it. Finally, it grew to be too much. Peter buried his face in Wade's neck, concealing whatever wretched, helpless expression he was wearing,

biting Wade's collarbone in retaliation because he felt just a little vengeful.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Yes, Peter had started it and it was therefore Peter's fault, so getting pissed off at Wade was pointless, but Peter wasn't supposed to... to react like this. Like he was still reacting, pre-come welling out of him only to be washed away, the relentless beating of the water hurting his swollen cock as much as soothing it. He moaned.

"Right, that does it," Wade growled, the disciplined stillness he'd been straining to maintain shattering as he broke into a whirlwind of motion, hauling Peter toward the exit. Peter caught a glimpse of slack-jawed spectators, most of whom were jacking off to the spectacle Peter had provided them. Pitched high enough for those spectators to hear, Wade announced: "I'm gonna fuck you silly in our cell."

Wade's statement sent a spike of shocked heat through Peter that had him gasping, but Wade only propelled him into the changing room, threw a towel at Peter for him to hastily wipe himself with, and tossed Peter his clothes. When they were dressed, Wade saluted the guards on the way out and led Peter straight to their cell, where Peter, waking up from the inexplicable trance he'd been in, swiftly regained his ability to speak.

"W-wait," Peter said, as Wade slammed the metal door shut and crowded Peter against it, forearms flat on either side of Peter.

"What the fuck was that?" demanded Wade. "You can't just... Did you think that example of blatant exhibitionism would put 'em off?"

"You aren't touching me," Peter blurted, because that was what popped into his brain. Wade was standing close to him, but was decidedly—conspicuously—not touching him. Anywhere.

"Damn right, I ain't touching you." Wade's voice was rough, even angry, but Peter had a hunch that it wasn't Peter he was angry with. Wade's anger was aimed inward, at himself, probably because Wade was still aroused, pupils dilated and hard-on tenting his pants. "You don't want any of this. You're just a stupid kid playing with fire."

That annoyed Peter enough to distract him from the minor detail that he was still aroused, too. And that a dozen or so inmates had seen him aroused, which he'd freak out about later, when he didn't have to prove to Wade that he wasn't an ickle baby unicorn. "Yeah? Well, this 'stupid kid' won't keep getting hit on by guys who think you aren't satisfying me, so they should satisfy me instead."

Wade frowned at him. "And you figured climbing me in public would fix that?"

"I'd rather fix *them*, as in, neuter all of them. But I can't. This is the best I can do, show off how happy our fake prison marriage is."

Wade withdrew, as if just recognizing that he'd been caging Peter in, and Peter surprised himself by raising a hand to draw Wade back, a hand he quickly lowered. "Didn't it occur to you," Wade said, "to, I dunno, run it past me first? You nearly gave me a heart attack."

I nearly gave you an orgasm, Peter didn't say, because that would be below the belt. Literally and metaphorically. God, he was punning again. He must be more anxious than he'd thought. "Didn't you say you liked my unpredictability?"

Wade huffed. And didn't answer. He climbed into his bunk and said, shortly, "I'mma sleep. Wake me up for dinner."

Except that Wade didn't sleep. He was as lifeless as a stone, lying on his back with his eyelids shut and his limbs motionless, but there was a tension strung through him, tight and unnatural. Peter couldn't be completely certain that Wade was awake, but he could somehow intuit that Wade was.

It was awful. Peter had never genuinely cheesed Wade off, before. He'd gone against Wade's wishes today, all but molesting him. Wade's cooperation notwithstanding, Peter had just... imposed himself.

Eventually, after an eternity of dealing cards and playing against himself on their rickety table, Peter mumbled, "I'm sorry."

Minutes passed. The five of diamonds trembled in Peter's grip, because he was shaking. He was beginning to comprehend how momentous the whole incident was, and how Wade had clearly desired more but hadn't taken it, despite Peter—at least physically—desiring more as well.

Then, Wade sighed and sat up on his bunk. He was rubbing his temples, and he seemed... sad, of all things. Sad and guilty.

"Nah," Wade said. "You don't gotta apologize. I wasn't mad at you, Petey. I was mad at myself. And I wasn't giving you the silent treatment, if that was what it looked like. I just—I didn't reckon it was a good idea to look at you, or talk to you, when I couldn't... when I couldn't restrain myself." Wade folded his hands loosely in his lap, and there was a strange powerlessness to them, in spite of all the power Wade had in this hellish place.

Peter made an executive decision. He discarded his cards, got up, and went to Wade. He knelt in front of Wade, just as he'd tried to do in the shower, and took those huge, scarred hands in his, offering comfort to the one who had only ever protected him—from others and now from himself.

It had been the final test, although Peter hadn't been aware, until this very moment, that he'd been subconsciously testing Wade. He'd been afraid that Wade's tolerance had limits, that Wade would succumb to the temptation of having Peter around him, that he'd revert to a beastly, atavistic state, a state that everybody else in this prison expected him to occupy.

Wade didn't say a word, letting his hands be held, and Peter held them, the both of them unmoving, until the bell rang for dinner.

Chapter 5

1. In this story, state prisons absorb severe budget cuts by cutting down on what they feel are non-essential expenditures, such as employing IT Security Officers. Basically, there is little to no cybersecurity in public prisons. Instead, they restrict any access the prisoners may have to computers, because that's cheaper than allowing the prisoners access and then expending resources to monitor that access.

2. Conversations between prisoners and visitors are not monitored, either, due to a law having been passed in years prior, protecting the civil liberties and visitation rights of prisoners.

3. Everything I have said above is bullshit in the real world. Thank you for reading, regardless!

Oh, and Dopinder is an Indian *just like me*, so I'm stoked to be writing him!

Peter's good behavior had gotten him access to the computer lab, although he suspected that the "good behavior" he was being rewarded for was keeping Wade out of trouble, and not for behaving properly himself. Peter's performance in the shower definitely hadn't been

good behavior, not by any stretch of the imagination; if it hadn't been for Wade acting as crowd control, Peter might've incited a riot.

Nonetheless, here Peter was, in the lab—precisely where he'd been yearning to be, surrounded by the familiar, muted buzzing of computers on standby. It was soothing. Therapeutic. Even if the computers were mid-nineties IBM desktops that resembled museum exhibits. Aside from that slight anachronism, the lab was perfect; it was blissfully empty, an oasis where Peter wasn't perpetually in the horny crosshairs of his fellow inmates.

But good behavior wasn't the only reason Peter had gotten into the lab. The prison director delegated non-essential prison-running responsibilities to the various inmates, responsibilities that were apportioned based on the inmates' abilities. Peter's massively nerdy CV marked him out as the only inmate qualified to fix networking problems and do the graphics editing required for the publication of prison pamphlets, hygiene posters and toilet signs. There were also operation manuals for the guards, information leaflets for the visitors and routine schedules for the prisoners.

Most of the documentation was generic and was provided by the state government, but prison-specific documentation had to be published by the prison itself. For that, they needed someone capable of using publishing software, but why would they waste their less-than-adequate funding on hiring an independent contractor when they could simply source a tech expert from within their own facility?

Prisoners with no specialized expertise did the grunt-work, such as ironing the laundry, helping out in the kitchen or cleaning the toilets. Wade—whose sole specialization was

dismemberment—had no professional experience that was practically applicable in the prison, and was therefore relegated to janitorial duties.

Meanwhile, Peter, who was at the very pinnacle of techie talent, was receiving the royal treatment of having the computer lab all to himself. There were about twelve computers in total, a minuscule number considering that the prison population exceeded two thousand. Even more puzzling was the utter absence of any of those prisoners from the lab—sans Peter, of course.

Any prisoner that requested computer access was supposed to get it, but Peter guessed that it was easier for the prison to cut off access on behavioral grounds, just like Peter had been *given* access on behavioral grounds. That would obey the letter of the law without obeying its spirit, which was, ultimately, to maintain free speech. Or the illusion of free speech.

Peter's job today was to fix a network error that was playing havoc on the prison's wireless printers. He logged into the admin account with the details he was supplied, ecstatic to be utilizing his mind again, only to be interrupted ten minutes later by a particularly antsy-looking guard. Peter belatedly noticed the glass-windowed cubicle at the far corner of the lab, from where the guard had presumably emerged.

"Hi," said the guard, shifting from foot to foot like a fidgety schoolboy.

Peter blinked. He'd never seen a guard exhibit such body language before. Usually, guards did their utmost to project dominance and confidence—unless it was in Wade's

presence, which, well. Wade wasn't exactly conducive to people's confidence. "Hi," Peter echoed hesitantly.

"I'm Dopinder. Like, um. The badge?" The guard tapped his own badge. "Like the badge I'm wearing says. Mr. Wilson told me about you. Uh, indirectly told me about you. Through the grapevine."

Mr. Wilson? Not Deadpool?

"Which is to say, if you need anything? You ask me. I owe Mr. Wilson my life, so. If you're his partner, that means I owe you."

Peter... was still blinking. "You owe him your life? How?"

"He saved me from a knife in the stomach, courtesy of Ivan the Terrible." As if sharing a secret, Dopinder bent closer to Peter to confide: "The name really was Ivan. And he really was terrible."

Wow. "Wade did that? That's amazing."

"Then, he saved my marriage."

"Your *marriage*?"

"My wife Gita wouldn't be my wife if Mr. Wilson hadn't advised me to... er, never mind what he advised me to do. But it worked. So, here I am. Proud father of two, proud survivor of a potential shish-kebabing. I mean, I like shish-kebabs as much as the next guy, but I'd rather not *be* one." Dopinder beamed at Peter, alarmingly starry-eyed. "And here you are, his very own Gita! I prayed that Mr. Wilson would find love! He deserves it."

Peter winced. "Ha ha," he said. "Yeah. He... He deserves so much." Like several tranquilizer darts in a row, just to prevent him from going apeshit every few seconds. But the biggest revelation here was that Wade was capable of making friends. Diehard loyal friends, even. Would wonders never cease?

"So!" Dopinder bounced on his feet with all the busy eagerness of a squirrel. "Can I be of assistance?"

Peter automatically opened his mouth to say: *No, thank you*. But then the rest of his brain caught up, and he enquired: "Are you the main guard of the lab?"

"The only guard, more like. Hardly anyone ever visits, which is why they haven't assigned any more guards here. All I do is stare at computers all day. Not at porn! Not at porn on those computers." Dopinder was painfully earnest. "That would be a betrayal of Gita."

Uh-huh. "And the prison monitors all multimedia access, doesn't it?"

Dopinder coughed. "Technically."

"Technically?"

"As in, I'm the only guard here, so it's up to me to make the rounds, to monitor usage, to check if anybody's downloading child porn or whatever." Dopinder gestured at the empty seats. "But there's nobody to monitor."

Peter smiled. "Except me."

Dopinder's eyes widened with dawning realization. He smiled back. "Except you."

When Peter returned to the cell, he was all but vibrating with energy. Wade, who'd just gotten back from mopping the mess hall, squinted at him.

"Do computers do it for you? 'Cause you've never been this excited."

Peter grinned at Wade. "Why, hello there, Mr. Stabbity Stab McStab."

"Why is my middle name also Stab?"

"Why the heck not? Multiple puncture wounds are your thang. Anyhow, I met Dopinder. I couldn't trust that he wasn't lying when he said he owed you—it could've been just another setup by the guards—so I didn't run my masterplan past him. Yet. Figured I'd confirm his veracity with you, first."

"Veracity? Damn. The way you talk, Petey, I swear..."

"Is it true? Is Dopinder your man on the inside?"

Wade shrugged. "He sneaks me chocolates, sometimes. Or weed cookies. His wife bakes the most incredible weed cookies."

"Weed—" Peter spluttered. "That's not what this conversation is about! It's about me finally participating in the prison economy. About me finally having a skill to trade."

Wade quirked an eyebrow.

“Not *that* skill!”

“You don’t have it, anyway. Virgin.”

“Screw you. Not.”

“So what’s your masterplan?”

Peter paced the length of the cell, too energized to sit down. “How many prisoners do you reckon are satisfied by their visitations?”

“Like, conjugally satisfied? Not many.”

“No, I meant... emotionally satisfied.”

“You think these assholes are capable of emotions?”

“When it comes to their kids, yes. Their families. Their homes.”

Wade regarded Peter in puzzlement. “And this is useful to you, because...?”

“Because! I can reclaim some of my agency! Not all of it, not while everyone classifies me as your pet catamite, but some of it. I can hack the system. It won’t even be a challenge. If I can arrange virtual correspondence with the prisoners’ families, correspondence that goes beyond what is allowed by the prison, maybe I can launch my own business. Maybe I won’t constantly need your protection, if my being undamaged is of importance to enough inmates that they leave me alone.”

“And what if that’s just wishful thinking?”

Peter huffed impatiently. "Can't you be, like, more supportive?"

"I can be supportive!" Wade straightened, comically attentive. "Lay it on me."

"What if I start with the toughest nuts to crack? The dons. The leaders. The bosses. The guys who may've been banned from regular spousal or familial visits for their misconduct. They'll be the most desperate to communicate with their folks. Besides, if I get them to fall in line, their lackeys will follow." Peter smirked. "Brilliant, no?"

An indecipherable expression flashed across Wade's features, a mixture of pride and affection and something else, something dark and possessive and not altogether safe, that momentarily stole Peter's breath. "Brilliant."

Ignore the weirdness. Ignore and deny. "Genius, even."

Wade appeared to be going with the ignore-and-deny methodology, too. He sighed mournfully. "My little bird's gonna fly the nest, someday."

"This prison, a nest? It's nowhere near as nurturing."

"Okay, then. My little chicken's gonna fly the coop."

"And you're the chickenhawk, I presume?"

"'Course I am."

Peter snorted. "Please. You couldn't take advantage of me if you wanted to. Which you don't."

"You're painting me as some sorta saint."

"An ultra-violent, serial-killing, mass-murdering saint."

"That's more like it."

Peter dropped down beside Wade on the lower bunk, his shoulder brushing Wade's companionably. "I might need you to make some inroads for me, though. Just to begin with. Initial introductions. Because if I just walk up to that dude with the hair like Al Pacino in *The Godfather*—"

"The Corleone heir?"

"That's him. If I just walk up to him, he'll assume I'm offering him sex, and that's not an assumption I can afford for him to have. But if *you* approach him on my behalf, there's a chance he'll actually listen to you before siccing his goons on you."

"And even if he does sic 'em on me, I can fight them off?"

Peter gave Wade a thumbs-up. "That's the spirit! Not that it'll come to that, but..."

"Did I mention you're terrifying?"

"You may have done so. A couple of times."

"This is one of those times."

"Aw, just admit I'm your type."

"You're my type." Wade must've intended it as a joke, but it came out so unexpectedly *serious* that even Wade seemed stunned by it.

Peter's banter dried up in his throat. "Oh," he said lamely, abruptly over-conscious of where his arm rested against Wade's, a casual intimacy he wouldn't have dared when they'd met. If Peter withdrew, it'd be taken as a rejection,

but if he didn't, it'd be taken as... what? Tacit permission? And why didn't that frighten Peter as much as it used to?

Or at all?

But before Peter could move, frozen as he was with indecision, Wade decided for him.

Wade got up and went to their table, where their previous card game was still laid out, surveying it as if contemplating resuming it.

He'd saved Peter again. Saved Peter from making a choice. He kept doing that, like he was confident that Peter wouldn't choose him, and that, even if he did, it wouldn't be for the right reasons.

For a maximum security prison detainee with the bloodiest criminal record in modern American history, Wade Wilson sure was obsessed with doing the right thing. The right thing by Peter, at any rate.

And it was... It was getting to Peter. Arguably, it'd been getting to him all along, but ever since the Shower Incident last week, Peter had been preternaturally aware of Wade's presence. Of Wade's *body*, especially, big and broad and unyielding as Peter now knew it was.

He'd been having dreams about it. Which was freaky and bizarre, given that Wade's body was the stuff of nightmares. But Peter's dreams about it weren't nightmares. They were blurry, as if with water, and there were calluses sliding over his skin, fingertips that skated idly along Peter's hips. They wandered up to toy with his nipples, and then drifted down the curve of his spine, dipping between his thighs, teasing and maddening and gentle. Always gentle.

In the dreams, Wade's touch set off what felt like subcutaneous flares, islands of pooling heat inside Peter that spread and merged like seals of molten wax, like brands of ownership. Peter himself was nothing but a throbbing brand under Wade's hands, freshly seared and turning redder, hotter. It almost hurt. It had Peter shuddering in waves that peaked and passed, only to rise again. And again. Peter babbled nonsense, as if in a delirium, and Wade's voice was in his ear, issuing instructions that Peter couldn't quite understand, commands to be good, to be patient.

Peter inevitably woke up from those dreams sweating and hard, but at least he was on the upper bunk, so he didn't have to suffer the humiliation of Wade seeing him in that condition.

Hearing him, however...

"I don't... I don't ever sleep-talk, do I?" Peter asked, and dread swooped low in his belly when Wade paused before answering.

"No," said Wade, and it was a kind answer, a considerate answer.

Just like Wade's hands in Peter's dreams were kind—implacably kind—even if that was what made them cruel.

"Right." Peter looked away, face burning. "Nice to know."

Chapter 6

Pedro Corleone was unusual for a mob boss, in that he wasn't very physically impressive. Instead, he was lean and wiry and not much taller than Peter. Pedro would've been unremarkable but for his smile, which was the sort of smile normally seen on a shark, sharp and hooked and predatory. He had cold gray eyes that were uncannily intelligent, and his gaze had a distinctly steely gleam, like the gleam of a paring knife.

It was both scary and encouraging—scary because Pedro maintained command of no less than twenty prisoners despite all of them plainly outsizing him, and encouraging *because* he maintained command of no less than twenty prisoners despite all of them plainly outsizing him.

Hey, if Pedro could do it, maybe Peter could do it, too. Not that Peter wanted a bunch of slaving attack dogs at his beck and call. One was more than enough. *Wade* was more than enough. And Peter couldn't even handle him, most of the time.

Not yet.

Regardless, the plan was underway.

Wade and Peter approached the Corleone clique in the exercise yard, where Pedro and his pals (Pedro And His Pals, god, it was like the name of a boyband) were posing intimidatingly on the stairs descending into the enclosure. Pedro sat in the middle, with a pair of towering thugs leaning on the stairwell on either side of him, built like brick shithouses and smelling about as fragrant. They must be Pedro's bodyguards.

"Here we go," Wade said under his breath, halting in front of the stairs. Peter took up a position next to him, not behind him, because Peter had to present himself as Wade's equal.

Yeah, right.

Peter was so nervous, he had butterflies in his stomach. Except that butterflies weren't carnivorous enough for the gonna-puke anxiety he was having. Piranhas were more like it. He had piranhas in his stomach, actively eating it. It would be completely devoured in about four seconds.

He battled the urge to reach out and hang onto Wade's sleeve, like a child hanging onto his teacher's sleeve on his first day at school. But Peter couldn't appear vulnerable, so he stood apart from Wade with his back straight and his stance mostly relaxed. Gone were the days of cowering in Wade's shadow.

Peter had to present himself as a businessman capable of standing on his own. Somewhat. Wade would have to be his frontman, at least to begin with, but Peter would take the

reigns of the operation soon enough. He had to convince Pedro that he had it in him.

Even if Peter wasn't sure he did. This was a whole new world to him, and not the kinda whole new world Aladdin would sing about in Disney movies. This was Peter's only foray into crime. Not *real* crime, in which anyone came to harm, but crime nonetheless. Never before in his life had Peter deliberately committed an illegal act.

But if Peter didn't do it, he'd be all but volunteering himself for a brutal deflowering if Wade was ever separated from him—if Wade was ever placed in solitary or sent to the hospital ward or simply moved to a different cell. Peter had to have some skill of value to trade other than loaning out his ass, or he'd be a prison bitch forever.

"Deadpool," said Pedro calmly, even as the Tweedledum-and-Tweedledee duo flanking him flexed their muscles showily. "To what do I owe this dubious pleasure?"

"Actually," Wade began, but before he could recite the speech he and Peter had rehearsed, Peter surprised himself by stepping forward and holding out his hand.

"Actually, I'm the guy that's here to meet you," Peter said. "Mr. Corleone. Sir."

Maybe it was instinct that made Peter do it. Maybe it was the sense that mafia dons didn't respect men who couldn't speak for themselves. Or maybe it was the sense that Wade might tack on, *Or I'll beat yo ass*, as a threat to force Pedro to cooperate.

Whatever it was, it worked. Miraculously.

Because, after raising an eyebrow at Peter's presumption, Pedro just smirked and shook Peter's hand. "Greetings," Pedro said indulgently, as if to a toddler. "So you're the infamous Polly Parker."

Polly? Were they feminizing Peter now, further oppressing him with the misogyny that had been used to oppress women for millennia? If Pedro was testing Peter by calling him that, too bad. Peter wasn't going to protest indignantly, wasn't going to clam up, wasn't going to go on the defensive.

"That I am," Peter retorted easily, like it didn't bother him. And it didn't. There was nothing remotely offensive about being compared to a woman, even if most of these losers thought there was. Perhaps Pedro would deem it a failure, that Peter didn't break out into a roaring, macho, heteronormative rage to defend his own masculine honor, but Peter didn't see the point of banging his nonexistent pecs like a wannabe King Kong.

Again, to Peter's luck, Pedro seemed to find Peter's response entertaining. With a quirk of that shark's smile, Pedro said, "I take it that you're here to make a business proposition? You have the look of a peddler with something to sell." Pedro leered at Peter. "Other than the obvious."

Wade growled, and Peter elbowed him in the guts to shut him up. It didn't escape Peter's notice that the majority of Pedro's gang gaped at the gesture, like Peter had just elbowed a dragon and gotten away with it.

Peter coughed delicately. "I'm, uh, I'm sorry to hear that your... I heard that you were banned from receiving visitors after the, er, after the incident with the smuggled drugs."

Pedro's eyes iced over.

Peter shivered.

"Yes, and?" Now Pedro's voice was icy, too.

Shit. Was Peter screwing this up? *Shit*. But if it upset Pedro so much to be denied access to his family, he'd be even more desperate to hear from them, wouldn't he? "I can fix that," Peter said as quickly as he could, before Pedro murdered him. Not that Wade would let Pedro murder him. "I can bring you photos, pictures, even videos of your family. And send your replies to them. If you're interested."

Tweedledee, on Pedro's left, scoffed incredulously. "What're you gonna do, princess, connect 'em telepathically?"

"No," said Peter slowly, trying not to sound like he was talking down to an ignoramus. "I'm going to connect them *virtually*. Ever heard of the internet?" Whoops. That did sound sarcastic and condescending.

Tweedledee snarled.

Peter... refused to quail. Even if Tweedledee could pulverize him with the weight of his jowls alone.

Pedro was watching the exchange with amusement. "You're in charge of the computer lab, aren't you?" Pedro asked, clearly better informed than his goons. The ice had vanished from his voice, thank god. "You think you can hack the system?"

"I can hack anything," Peter boasted, openly projecting the bravado he felt about the only thing he *had* any bravado to feel. He was great at technology; why not flaunt it?

"Can you? But how'll you get the photos and videos to me if I'm not allowed in the lab?"

"Ahem. There's a guard." Peter couldn't spill Dopinder's identity, but he could mention Dopinder subtextually. "I, I might have this guard sneaking an iPhone into the prison. An iPhone I'll hook up to the network, but with a rerouted ISP that remains untrackable." When Pedro frowned at the jargon, Peter hastened to explain: "Basically, you'll have the ability to correspond with your family even if the jail has banned you from doing so."

Pedro went quiet. Very, very quiet. There was a new intensity, a frightening fascination in his scrutiny of Peter. "Well, well, well," Pedro murmured.

Well, *what?* "You could see your children," Peter continued doggedly, because if he wasn't a sufficiently effective salesman, then this deal would go south, as would any hopes Peter had of ever being his own man. "Wish them a happy birthday, tell them you miss them—"

"I don't have children," Pedro said dismissively. "But I do have a grandmother."

A... A what?

Pedro Corleone. Had a grandma. That he evidently doted on.

The heir of the Corleones was a granny's boy.

What the hell?

"Okay," Peter said weakly, because, given the matching glares worn by every single member of Pedro's posse, the importance and unmockability of Pedro's grandmother was a universal law, and anybody who poked fun at her would be killed in a deserted corridor. "I have an aunt," Peter said

meaninglessly, and for some reason, *that* made Pedro chuckle.

“Give me a week, Mr. Parker. I’ll ponder your proposal, and whether I’ll be willing to take a chance on it being a potential conspiracy, a plot hatched by the prison to surveil my correspondence with my famiglia.”

Whoa. Pedro did enjoy being eloquent, didn’t he? He must have a private book collection back at the Corleone estate; he gave off the aura of an avid reader. But the best part was... “You—you called me Mr. Parker.”

Pedro grinned. “Do you prefer Polly?”

“No!” Peter hurried to say. “No. I mean. Whatever.”

“Farewell, Mr. Whatever. I’ll send a messenger when I’m ready to negotiate.”

And that was it.

That was *it*, and as Peter walked away, victory surging within him like a sparkly wave of sparkles, he had to suppress the impulse to high-five Wade like they were delinquents who’d pulled off a prank.

Wade was uncharacteristically silent, though.

It wasn’t until they got to their cell that Peter whirled around and hugged Wade, as tightly and fiercely as he could, shocking himself by how much he needed to do it. He was overcome with gratitude for what Wade had done, even if Wade had just stood there as Peter had spun his tale.

But that was precisely it. Wade had *stood there*. Wade had supported him, without taking the spotlight from him, without controlling or overtaking him, without speaking for him, without even defending him. Wade had stood by as Peter had taken the lead.

Wade had just deferred to Peter, in full view of everybody, and that had to be why Pedro had listened to Peter, really listened to him, rather than dismissing him outright. If the resident badass serial killer figured Peter was worth listening to, maybe he was worth listening to.

“Wha—” Wade rocked slightly at the impact of Peter’s overenthusiastic tackle. “Peter?”

“Um,” said Peter, still wrapped around Wade like a monkey around a tree. “I know I haven’t said this before, but thank you. For everything. You’re the best.”

“I’m the best?” Wade laughed humorlessly. “Even though I can’t change what people say about you? Even though I’m the cause for them saying it? That you’re—you’re—”

“That I’m Polly Parker? Like I said to Corleone, whatever. That isn’t what matters.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Wade. This is me, expressing affection for you. Accept it. Or have you forgotten how to hug?”

Tentatively, after a few minutes of Peter essentially hanging from Wade’s shoulders like a sweater from a coat-hanger—because yeah, Wade was just that tall—Wade began hugging Peter back.

Or to be more accurate, he began gathering Peter up, lifting Peter inch by inch, until Peter's toes were dangling above the floor. Then, Wade just... held Peter and held him and *held* him, and it occurred to Peter that he had failed to specify a duration for the hug.

It also occurred to him that he was glad he hadn't.

This was the body that was always shielding him, that was always there for him, an unspoken promise of protection even if it did nothing but hover in the background like it had today.

This was *Wade's body*, and suddenly, Peter was confronted with the reality that, somewhere along the line, it had become precious to him. Every scar, every mark, every sinew. All of it.

Wade had become precious to him, not only as a shelter but as a companion, and that was...

That had to be why Peter kept the hug going, far past when it should've become awkward.

It never did become awkward. Even when they gradually drew apart, it wasn't awkward, in spite of the fact that the close contact had warmed Peter up in more ways than one. The same warmth was reflected in Wade's eyes. There was no self-conscious throat-clearing, no manly mutual backslapping to distance themselves from each other. It was just comfortable.

And if the tension in Wade's limbs had eased, like Peter had hugged away what had been troubling him, then it was perfectly natural for Peter to be happy that he'd brought Wade peace.

Yes, happy. He was happy that Wade was happy. That they were happy. Together.

This is getting complicated, Peter, an imaginary Aunt May warned him from inside his own head.

But when had Peter ever been good at heeding warnings?

Chapter 7

Waiting for Pedro's messenger was akin to waiting for a "not guilty" verdict in a court trial, and Peter knew what that was like. Of course, he hadn't gotten what he'd been waiting for, then. He was increasingly terrified that it'd happen again.

Wade was getting agitated, too, like it was his neck on the chopping block, not Peter's.

Peter tried reassuring him by saying: "Technically, it's my ass on the line, not my neck, so. Anatomy. Um. Anatomy's important?"

But Wade wasn't as easy to charm with humor as he usually was, and he got all bristly whenever someone so much as looked at Peter wrong, which was counter-productive as it got Wade formal reprimands that were noted on his record. Enough strikes on his record, and he'd be up for an extension of his already eternal sentence.

The latest reprimand occurred when an inmate casually slapped Peter's ass while walking past him in a hallway,

and Wade literally just picked the man up and *threw him against a wall*. Hard enough for him to bounce off of it.

It was a timely reminder that Wade wasn't altogether tame, even if he hugged Peter like Peter was necessary to him, and even if he would never hurt Peter, not even on pain of death. It didn't mean he couldn't hurt other people. Or that he didn't want to.

When Peter finally got Wade to chill out—or maybe just not be in permanent hitman mode—Wade was vaguely apologetic about it, but his eyes were still feverish with rage. The air around him crackled with the potential for violence, like the electric atmosphere before a storm. The man he'd thrown crawled away, pale and shaking, and Peter hung onto Wade with a straining grip. It wasn't easy to hold back a body so much larger than his.

It wasn't like Peter didn't get why Wade had snapped. It was because Peter was afraid, palpably afraid, and his fear was setting Wade off, driving Wade into an overprotective frenzy.

Not that it was Peter's fault. Because it wasn't. Wade would probably kick his *own* ass if Peter began blaming himself for Wade's actions. So Peter didn't, but he was mature enough to differentiate between causality and responsibility. He wasn't responsible for Wade's actions, even if he was, indirectly, causing them.

That was it. He wasn't responsible for Wade, and Wade wasn't responsible for him.

It was just that they cared about one another, and that made it... challenging. To be objective. To not feel a tug within themselves when the other was unsettled, to not feel

the compulsion to remove all the obstacles in the other's path.

Like Wade was compelled to remove all the obstacles in Peter's path. Even if Wade's definition of "remove" was closer to Peter's definition of "kill."

They might as well be starring in a dystopian, gay, prison version of [*Lost in Translation*](#). With Wade as a particularly menacing Bill Murray, and Peter as a young ingenue and Wade's unlikely savior.

Jesus. Peter was going to have to start attending movie nights in the rec room. He was going into Hollywood withdrawal.

Ironically, it was Wade who ended up in the infirmary for busted knuckles, because as if the wall-throwing hadn't been enough, Wade had also punched the wall.

"Think of the walls," said Peter, mock-pityingly. "The poor walls, Wade! You're gonna leave dents in them at this rate."

Wade huffed, surfacing from his funk at last and smiling half-heartedly.

The nurse, a sticklike, elderly fellow who could've played a cadaver in a B-grade horror film, wasn't as amused by Peter's attempts at levity. He did, however, permit Peter to borrow the cotton swabs and the iodine and tend to Wade himself, given that there were no deadly instruments required for such a basic job, and given that there were three more patients in the infirmary who were demanding attention, griping from their beds after what must've been a helluva fistfight. Footfight. Appendage-fight? There were shoe-prints on that guy's shirt. Ouch.

Peter tugged the green plastic curtain around the cot Wade was sitting on, until they were enclosed by it, because it just wasn't kosher to bandage Wade where anybody could see him being vulnerable. Not only because Wade was Deadpool and he had a street cred to maintain, but because Peter had become inexplicably possessive of Wade's vulnerability. Which was a peculiar thing to be possessive about, but... eh, Peter wasn't as peculiar as Wade.

In the bizarreness competition, Wade was still winning.

Which was why Wade went from his earlier pre-outburst restlessness to being absolutely motionless, as if Peter had immobilized him with a stun gun instead of just taking Wade's hands.

"You all right?" Peter asked softly, because there was a subterranean tremor in Wade's fingers, tangling with his own. "You're a little shaky."

"I'm. I'm fine. It's just that—"

"Just what?"

"*You* may not be fine. After all this is over. If Corleone decides he isn't cooperating with you, it'll be because he thinks you're working with the guards. If he thinks you're working with the guards, so will everyone else. Once you have a reputation as a snitch, Peter, a reputation as a traitor, then that'll be it for you. Even I won't be able to protect you if literally every goddamn asshole in this joint is out for your life."

Ah. So it wasn't just Peter's fear setting Wade off. It was Wade's own fear. His fear of losing Peter. "Is that why you've been all... berserker-y?"

“Berserker-y?” Wade snickered. It was a hushed snicker, since they were in semi-public, but a snicker nevertheless.

Peter rolled his eyes. “You try forming actual words when your boyfriend is having a mental breakdown on your behalf. A mental breakdown that might result in him gutting somebody and then offering you their entrails.”

It wasn’t until Wade didn’t answer for six solid seconds that Peter realized what he’d said. Not “fake” boyfriend. Just boyfriend.

Wow. That had to be the worst Freudian slip in history. And what made it the worst was that Peter didn’t want to take it back. Or joke about it. Or pretend like he hadn’t said it.

So he just focused on swabbing iodine onto the torn skin of Wade’s knuckles, endeavoring to be as gentle as he could, and simultaneously endeavoring not to sink into the earth in humiliation.

Eventually, Wade spoke, and he sounded strangely wobbly when he said, “You can’t get a decent bouquet of flowers in a hellhole like this. Entrails will have to do.”

“A bouquet of entrails?” Peter joined in with a snicker of his own. “Smooth move, bro. I bet that’s real romantic.”

“Nothing like a steaming pile of intestines to remind you of how steamy your relationship is.”

Peter was sniggering so much, he couldn’t do the bandaging correctly. “Wade. Wade, shut up. I can’t put your bandaids on if I’m fucking pissing myself laughing.”

“I made you swear!” Wade crowed victoriously. “I made you honest-to-god swear!”

"I do swear."

"Not the F-word! Not out loud! Somethin' in you is still your auntie's sweet li'l boy. Courteous. Civil. Polite."

"I'm not some guilt-ridden Catholic schoolboy."

"You'd look cute in the uniform of a Catholic schoolboy."

"You wish." Peter cradled Wade's hands, huge as they were, too big for Peter to cup in his own. They just... rested on Peter's open palms, scarred and massive and somehow pliant. These hands—hands that'd tossed a grown man aside like a rag-doll—had let Peter maneuver them, bandage them, heal them.

And Peter was grateful for that, for having the opportunity to remove Wade's pain. This was his definition of "remove," he supposed.

Peter's thumb was brushing the fabric now covering Wade's knuckles. It was a light, idle touch, lulling them both as it repeated itself, again and again, back and forth. It was paralyzing. Drugging. Soothing.

Wade was motionless again, although there was a different quality to it this time, a simmering, heated patience that was messing with Peter's mind. It *must* be messing with Peter's mind, because when he bent to examine his thankfully not-too-shoddy bandaging, the only idea that popped into Peter's head was that Wade's hands were near enough to kiss.

All Peter had to do was lean in and run his lips over those knuckles, perhaps add a swipe of hot, wet tongue—just to see Wade shudder—

"Gentlemen," said a bland voice, and Wade snatched his hands away from Peter like they'd been caught necking with their clothes off. The nurse was standing there, curtains drawn, observing them like they were uninteresting animals in a zoo exhibit, moments away from mating. Neither Wade nor Peter had noticed the curtains being drawn. How had they not noticed? "It's been fifteen minutes. Sign out when you're finished." There was a meaningful pause. "And you should be finished."

Peter sprang to his feet like a jack-in-the-box. "We'll sign out! Uh. But I'll have to sign out for Wade, on account of his knuckles. If that's okay."

"Go ahead," said the nurse, and drifted off to check the drip feeding into the cannula of an unconscious inmate.

Wade rose up from the bed, looking totally poleaxed, like a piano had been dropped on him. A Peter-shaped piano.

"I'mma sign us out," Peter said, jittery with nerves. "You, er. You can just. Chuck those bandage wrappers in the trashcan."

"I sorta *am* a trashcan," Wade muttered bafflingly, and when Peter asked him why, Wade replied: "A human trashcan. Full of bad thoughts. Bad, bad thoughts."

Peter didn't dare to ask whether Wade's bad thoughts were about Peter, and how Peter had been on the brink of kissing him today. Wade had to know that Peter had been on the brink of kissing him today.

Didn't he?

Chapter 8

The notion of kissing Wade stayed with Peter throughout the remainder of the day, and the day after that, and the next. It was like a subtle, insidious inception. If folks could be said to incept themselves.

The problem was, acting on it would take courage. It'd take courage to admit it, and even more to act on it. Especially here, especially now. A kiss wasn't just a kiss, in this place. It was the key to the freaking castle. It was as good as signing himself away—not just for kisses but for everything.

Was Peter ready for everything? No. Definitely not. Not yet.

Not that Wade would ever push for more than Peter was willing to give. Heck, Wade wouldn't even push for what Peter *was* willing to give.

And Peter was willing to give. He wasn't sure how much or how fast or just, like, *how* in general. He didn't have any experience to guide him through standard courtship rituals, let alone courtship rituals with a serial killer nicknamed Deadpool. But what Peter was sure about was that he pictured them being further along than where they were. Further along what path, Peter didn't know. Nor did he know where it led, only... only that it would be closer to Wade, and Peter yearned to be closer to Wade.

It was the opposite of the ignore-and-deny philosophy that Peter had (futilely) adopted so far. After all, even Peter's

talent for selective awareness was tested by nightly wet dreams about his cellmate *and* prolonged proximity to said cellmate *and* the knowledge that said cellmate was attracted to him in return.

It was also beginning to dawn on Peter that eight years was a long time, and if he was going to be stuck in here for those eight years, it would become nigh-unbearable to be celibate for his whole sentence. Particularly if he was stuck living with a man he had decidedly non-celibate thoughts about. It would become untenable. It was swiftly becoming untenable.

Yeah, Peter was a virgin, but he couldn't conceive of spending the majority of his youth without any form of sex, trapped in a touchless, loveless void, distanced from the one person he'd come to care about. It wouldn't have been sex with anybody but Wade—it would've been assault—but against the odds, Peter had developed a bond with Wade that was genuinely mutual. It would be a waste not to capitalize on it. Peter had always been an idealist, but prison was converting him into quite the utilitarian.

That aside, how could he even get Wade to participate? How could Peter set it up so that Wade wouldn't backpedal at Mach 3 as soon as Peter so much as breathed in his direction? And how could Peter do that so it gave Wade the space to say no? Peter, of all people, appreciated the importance of consent. All of Peter's efforts would be meaningless if Wade was coerced into kissing Peter, or emotionally blackmailed into doing so for fear of rejecting Peter.

Peter had to be serious, but not overly serious. And preferably in a context that was part-playful, that would give Wade an out.

Thankfully, Wade solved that quandary for Peter. By inviting Peter to join him for another round of poker.

Once they were seated on the cool concrete floor, cross-legged and scarcely a foot apart, the proverbial light went on in Peter's brain.

Hallelujah! This was it. This was Peter's chance.

"Don't worry," Wade said jokingly, waving his cards around as if they were notes of cash. "I won't pressure you into strip poker."

"I... I wouldn't mind if it was kiss poker," Peter mumbled, not daring to look up from his cards. He could feel Wade gaping at him. For approximately nine centuries.

"Kid," Wade began, in that well-meaning tone of his, which automatically annoyed Peter into scowling at him. "You don't understand what you're—

"I do understand," Peter interrupted. "I understand what's going on between us. I'm not a child. Don't you see what's happening?"

"Stockholm Syndrome?" Wade hazarded sarcastically, and Peter snorted.

"Wade, you're about as capable of Stockholming someone as a bunch of wet noodles are capable of being prison bars."

"You just compared me to wet noodles."

"Wade."

"No, really. Why would you wanna kiss wet noodles?"

“‘Cause they’re *my* wet noodles,” Peter snapped, and promptly blushed.

“Oh,” Wade said faintly, after a while. “*Oh.*”

“Yes, oh.” Peter had never been so violently embarrassed in his life. He decided to brazen through it. “So are you gonna play or what? Whoever loses kisses the other person. Deal?”

Wade stared and stared and stared at him.

“Unless you don’t want to,” Peter said tentatively.

“God, if you knew what I want—”

“I’d like to. I’d like to know.”

“You’re...” Wade shook his head. “You’re too innocent.”

“Maybe I’m tired of being innocent,” Peter said, meeting Wade’s eyes unwaveringly. “Maybe I’d like to lose my innocence. With someone I trust.”

“Trust?” Wade’s question was pained and filled with self-loathing. “You trust me?”

“I trust you.” So much for not being overly serious. Peter could hear his own seriousness, how undeniably certain he was. “Don’t tell me I shouldn’t.”

“When have I ever been able to tell you what to do?” Now, Wade sounded as fond as he was pained.

“Exactly. You don’t have to angst about taking advantage of me. Because you don’t control me.”

"Nobody can control you, Peter," Wade said wryly. "You have no clue what a threat that makes you, do you?"

"A threat?"

"To guys like Pedro, who are all about control. To this shitty system. To my sanity."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Comin' from me? Yep."

"Getting back to our card game..." Peter hesitated, then restated his terms. "Whoever loses kisses the other person. Proper kissing, not just a peck. Deal?"

"Deal," Wade croaked. "I. I can't believe this is hap—it can't—is this even real? What if it's a hallucination? Although I've never had nice hallucinations. What if you turn into a shark right before the kiss and bite off my face? My entire face, Petey. It's ugly enough as it is."

"Wade. Focus."

Wade didn't focus. He was more distracted than he'd ever been during their games, glancing frequently at Peter's mouth, his expression switching from wonder to disbelief.

Peter did focus, though. He was determined to win, because then Wade would have to lead. He'd have to lead like he'd been itching to, but hadn't, because of his morals. Morals that Peter had started to find weirdly attractive. He hadn't even realized that anyone *could* find morals attractive.

Perhaps it was foolish of Peter to dismantle the very morality that was responsible for his safety, for keeping the

lion in its cage and away from the lamb—not that Peter was proud of being the proverbial lamb, but wasn't there a passage in the bible about lions lying down with lambs?

Not that they'd be lying down. It was just kissing. Why was Peter's imagination so overactive, anyway? His blush was approaching nuclear levels of radioactivity.

Disregarding the fact that his cheeks were as red as Italian tomatoes ripening under the noonday sun, Peter pulled a full house and singsonged: "Mind on my money, money on my mind."

As Peter revealed his cards, equally smug and anxious, Wade laid his own cards down with unsteady fingers.

It wasn't surprising that Peter had won.

"Well?" Peter asked, when Wade didn't move. "Where's my reward?"

At least thirty seconds passed in silence.

Peter's heart was palpitating, rabbity and cowardly, because despite setting up this situation, he was still agonizingly helpless in it, still stupidly virginal, still the same wretched nerd who'd pictured his first kiss a million times but had never dared to do a thing about it.

He sat there, sweating and petrified, and Wade must've sensed it, because he didn't jest, didn't wink, didn't so much as smirk. Instead, Wade got up, as silent as he had been before, and knelt on the floor in front of Peter.

He took Peter's chin in his hand. In his broad, warm, gun-callused hand, the calluses grazing Peter's throat. Peter's

pulse skipped, and Wade let those calluses trail along Peter's jaw, cupping it.

There was a terrifying tenderness in how Wade was looking at him, terrifying because Peter had never been looked at like that before. Like a man—this man—would do anything for him, would touch him in every way he needed to be touched, and would do it as other men would worship.

Peter shut his eyes, because he couldn't bear to witness it—how solemn Wade was, and how momentous this was for them both, how it would change them irrevocably.

The space between them was charged with tension, almost unbearably so, and for no reason that he could comprehend, Peter began shivering, even though his skin was flame-hot.

Wade's breath grew nearer and nearer. Then there was a softness, the merest brush of lips against Peter's, feather-light and careful and so unexpectedly sweet that something within Peter twisted in anguish.

This—this wasn't—

This wasn't what he'd been prepared for.

They'd barely begun, and already it was too much. Peter gasped at the second kiss, and again at the third, but the kisses weren't becoming any more tangible, as if Wade couldn't bring himself to do more than offer. As if Wade couldn't bring himself to *take*.

"P-please," Peter stuttered, his voice breaking.

Wade groaned. He bit Peter's lower lip—gently, so gently—and licked over it, again and again, until Peter's mouth

parted of its own volition. Suddenly, the kiss was *wet*, so slick and deep and startlingly filthy that Peter moaned loudly, then stiffened in shock at his moan.

Wade eased him back down with deliberate caresses, with palms that skated along the planes of Peter's body, unraveling it as if it were a silken string. Peter was being gradually mastered, was being brought to heel, but rather than making Peter feel shameful, it lit a delicious fire in him, a fire stoked by how reverent Wade's mastery of him was, so reverent that Peter's submission to him didn't feel like submission at all.

Peter melted into a languorous haze. Wade was still kissing him, as if he couldn't stop, with more delicate, exquisite bites that didn't even sting; they only made Peter's lips swell and ache like they were bruised. It was as though Wade's kisses were patiently stripping Peter, layer by layer, leaving him naked and trembling in their wake. It was as if he was being slowly eaten, a thorough devouring to which he gave himself up gladly, piece by piece.

When Wade finally withdrew, in reluctant, lingering degrees, Peter opened his eyes. His vision was blurry with unshed tears. He was throbbing all over, his blood pounding in him, gathering heavy and tingling between his legs.

He was—he was hard, and he reached instinctively for Wade, only for Wade to grasp Peter's wrists and hold them away from him.

"Hey," Wade said quietly. "Peter. Peter, no. We're not ready for that." He smiled crookedly, and it was such an *affectionate* smile that it utterly disarmed Peter, that it halted Peter's rebuttal in its tracks.

Because even in this, Wade was gentle. Even when he was reminding Peter of Peter's own doubts, of Peter's own fears. And as Peter regained his rationality in the dreamy aftermath of all that kissing, he found himself admitting that Wade had a point. They had to do this step by step. They had to do this right. It was worth doing right.

They were worth doing right.

Pun intended.

"Okay," said Peter, in little more than a rasp. But being abruptly deprived of Wade was lonely and unpleasantly cold, so Peter asked: "Could we... Could we just hug?"

Wade gestured ironically at their tented pants. "I don't think that's—"

Peter's face fell.

"Ah, hell. C'mere." Wade held out his arms, and Peter collapsed into them, relieved. They felt like home.

Which was how he and Wade ended up hugging with hard-ons. It was difficult, but they managed it with a minimal number of dick jokes, aside from the unavoidable ones that left them giggle-snorting into each other's shoulders as they calmed down, their arousal fading away.

Eventually, they were just breathing together, two bodies pressed close and sharing warmth. Peter was reminded, strangely, of the warmth of his favorite sweater—the orange, misshapen monstrosity that Aunt May had knitted for him and that had got him mocked in school, but kept him toasty on those chilly winter mornings when everyone else's teeth were chattering, but his weren't.

There was a smug superiority to that memory, a smugness that transferred, mystifyingly, into the present.

“You’re a very muscular sweater,” Peter said, and Wade chuckled.

“Petey-boy, sometimes you make no sense.”

Chapter 9

Peter had privately begun referring to time as either BK or AK, “Before Kiss” or “After Kiss.” Now, After Kiss, the world was different. Even how Wade looked at him was different—long, hungry glances that left Peter as breathless as Wade’s teasing, tantalizing kisses did. Sometimes, Wade’s glances had a smoldering, considering quality, as if he were contemplating what he could do with Peter, what he could do *to* Peter, how he could debauch Peter in a thousand ways.

It was simultaneously empowering and scary—empowering because Peter was becoming acutely aware of the power he held as an object of desire—and scary because, well, Wade. Wade’s eyes had always had that electric, frightening intensity, and for Peter to have all that intensity focused on him was intimidating, to say the least. Every flick of Wade’s eyes up and down his body was like having a jolt of pure electricity shot through him, a mingled surge of adrenaline and lust. It reminded Peter that Wade was dangerous. Wade

may be a muzzled beast, but he was a beast nonetheless. There were still fangs behind that muzzle.

It turned Peter on desperately.

But Wade never pushed. In fact, Wade was doing the opposite of pushing; he was perpetually retreating, drawing Peter in, putting the onus on Peter to initiate any type of contact whatsoever. It was frustrating, but when Peter envisioned what it would be like for Wade to succumb to his appetites and overwhelm Peter, lay all of Peter's defenses to waste and just *take*—

Damn. It was daunting. Arousing as all hell, but daunting.

So Peter bottled up his half-baked complaints and endured what had to be the slowest, mushiest, most torturous courtship on the planet. It *was* torture, of this Peter was certain—a torture comprised of almost-there kisses, almost-there touches and the sort of prolonged, unbearable soul-gazing that was commonly categorized as “eye-fucking.” And yet, despite their self-imposed limitations, they shared what intimacies they could. Even if they were in public. Peter couldn't resist tangling his fingers with Wade, palm-to-palm, as they ate in the mess hall. They were learning how to eat one-handed.

The other inmates cringed at his and Wade's borderline disgusting sappiness; Peter often overheard the word “newlyweds” being bandied about in their wake. It was a word infused equally with envy and derision, and Peter found it hilarious that everyone assumed the “wedding night” had already been consummated, and that he and Wade were now in the midst of their honeymoon. Their gross, lovey-dovey honeymoon.

The truth was very far from that. There had never been a wedding night, and the pseudo-honeymoon currently underway bore more similarity to a Victorian-era exchange of sentimental billets-doux than it did to an orgiastic exploration of human sexuality. Not that Peter resented that. Except for when he had a hard-on. Then, he resented it *plenty*.

All that resentment flew out the proverbial window when, on a Thursday afternoon (Peter kept track of the weekdays mostly to preserve his own sanity), Peter got the news he'd been waiting for.

Pedro's lackey ambled by Peter's and Wade's bench in the mess hall, delivering a simple message: "The boss says yes. You'll see him tomorrow, in the library. After lunch."

Peter fought the urge to do a cartwheel. He'd probably bungle it, clumsy as he was. He settled for beaming at Wade.

Which was when it all went to shit. Predictably enough.

On the meandering path back to their cell, crossing corridor after corridor, they came upon a revolting scene—a man with a shaved, Swastika-tattooed scalp kicking an older prisoner in the guts, even though the pensioner was curled up, shielding himself from the blows. The bashing had clearly been going on for a while, because the elderly victim was visibly losing his strength, on the verge of just blacking out and letting himself be beaten into unconsciousness... or worse.

Peter recognized the victim as Smokes, the chain-smoking, friendly, Jewish octogenarian who was in for petty theft and who'd never committed a crime before. He wouldn't be in a maximum security facility like this if there weren't space

shortages in local prisons. Talk about rotten luck. And as for today's beatdown, Smokes must've been in the wrong place at the wrong time, a convenient target for the neo-Nazi brute currently pummeling him, likely for no other reason than Smokes being Jewish.

None of the onlookers were doing a damn thing. But Peter didn't even have the opportunity to call the guards—there was a Wade-shaped streak hurtling toward the skinhead at the speed of light, resolving into an extremely loud crunch as Wade's fist smashed right *into* the skinhead's nose and what seemed like halfway through his skull.

The skinhead dropped like a sack of potatoes. There was no fight, no retaliation; he was knocked out by that single punch. He lolled on the ground, bleeding copiously from the crater in the center of his face where his nose used to be. The blood pooled around his head in an expanding circle, almost reaching Wade's shoes.

Peter just stood there, aghast. Wade looked up at him, the vicious snarl of satisfaction Wade had been sporting disappearing. He blinked down at his blood-slick red fist, as if surprised by the strands of tissue that clung to it.

Peter's mind swam. Not only was what had occurred appallingly savage, but it had violated the terms of Wade's incarceration. Wade had injured a prisoner gravely enough to hospitalize them, and would therefore be sent to solitary. Away from Peter.

Leaving Peter alone. Unprotected.

Wade's widening eyes reflected Peter's growing horror back at him.

“Call the infirmary,” Wade said to the people gathered, bending to wipe his fist clean on the skinhead’s jumpsuit. “Two inmates down.”

But before anybody could even move, voices from just around the corner spoke up—voices that belonged to a pair of goons from Pedro’s posse. Very familiar goons from Pedro’s posse, and hey, hadn’t they been shadowing Peter and Wade all along? From the mess hall, even?

One of Pedro’s goons picked at his teeth with a grimy fingernail. “What an unfortunate accident,” he tsked. “Don’t you reckon, amigo?”

The second goon frowned in confusion. “Yeah, bruh, dunno what happened. Mr. Wilson and Mr. Parker were being total gentlemen. This poor dude just randomly tripped and fell onto the floor while beating up this other poor dude. Who knew a floor could be that brutal?”

Everyone else in the corridor—four other inmates, with a fifth hiding behind a wall-mounted fire extinguisher—shifted uncomfortably.

“Right, boys?” The original goon flashed his newly-picked teeth.

There was vigorous nodding all around. Nobody wanted to defy Pedro’s minions; it would be tantamount to defying Pedro, and that would be a death sentence.

Peter and Wade had been saved.

The relief that overcame Peter was staggering. He tottered up to Wade and slumped against him, breathing high and fast. Wade immediately pulled him in, into the shelter of Wade’s tall, towering body. It was a body capable of ferocity

surpassing an animal's, but it was a sanctuary to Peter. It always would be.

"We oughta go," Wade said into Peter's ear, as a passerby was dispatched to alert the infirmary. "Quickly. Before the guards arrive."

As they escaped, Pedro's goons waved at them—and Peter, after some hesitation, waved back.

Relieved as he was, Peter was still struggling to cope with the fact that there were now men willing to bear false witness to guard Peter's interests. As per the prison's regulations, the reporting of any crime required signed testimonies from witnesses before the appropriate punishment could be doled out to the offenders, but if the accuser—in this case, the Nazi—had no witnesses to corroborate his statement, then it would be invalid. When he awoke in the infirmary, the skinhead could rail on and on about Wade flying at him like a wrathful avenging angel, but with no witnesses to back up his claims, they'd fall flat. And Wade would go free.

It made Peter feel victorious. And sick to his stomach. And victorious. Which was a complicated Gordian knot of emotions. Peter had achieved enough of a status to earn the alliance of a mafia don and therefore the cooperation of the general prison population, but at what cost? In doing so, he had officially joined the ranks of these bonafide criminals—not only by planning to hack the internet from the labs, but by aiding and abetting a violent assault, and participating in an unspoken conspiracy of silence to prevent the perpetrator of that assault from ever being punished.

Peter was a bad guy, now. He'd thought of himself as a good guy, once. He'd *been* a good guy.

No longer. Today marked the demise of Peter Parker, everybody's friendly neighborhood nerd, even as it marked the rise of Peter Parker, criminal mastermind.

Well. He wasn't a mastermind yet. But he was getting there.

And he didn't know how to feel about that.

When they got to their cell, Wade wouldn't come near him. Even though Peter needed it. Instead, Wade paced restlessly, his hands clenching and unclenching, radiating a palpable fury. He was buzzing with an awful, wired energy that Peter didn't have to be a shrink to identify as self-hatred.

"Wade," Peter said. "Wade, look at me. We're back home. You're not in solitary. And I'm—"

"You're vulnerable," Wade spat. "Because of me. Because I couldn't stop myself from snapping like a lunatic. Because I just wanted to *hurt* the bastard, bring him down, fucking *break* him into his component parts."

"Smokes mightn't have survived if you hadn't intervened." It was true; a bashing was only ever a fracture away from resulting in a fatality, especially if the victim was aged and frail. While Peter was disturbed by the severity of Wade's actions, those very actions had saved an innocent man's

life. An innocent man like Uncle Ben. “What you did was right.”

“But not for the right reasons.”

“Wade. Don’t make it impossible for you to forgive yourself. You’re an expert at doing that. But I won’t let you.”

“Let me? I’m not... You couldn’t have stopped me.”

“Yes, I could’ve. If I’d even said the word ‘stop,’ you would’ve stopped. You’ve stopped before. In the yard, with the Irish jerk. Remember?”

“I...” Wade knuckled his eyes, as if he were about to cry, or as if he were about to gouge them out. He was shaking. “I’m sorry. I should’ve—why didn’t I *think*? No impulse control, that’s what my dad always—could’ve lost you, could’ve been locked away in solitary while every goddamn devil in this hellhole forced himself on you—”

Peter couldn’t tolerate it anymore. He went up to Wade and wrapped his arms around Wade’s shoulders—as far around Wade’s massive shoulders as they could go, anyhow—and basically hung from Wade’s giant frame like a tiny Christmas ornament. He swung there, his toes only just scraping the concrete as he buried his face in the warm hollow of Wade’s neck. “Hush,” he said, as softly as he could. “Wade, no. That’s just a nightmare scenario. None of that... None of that’s real. What’s real is you being here, with me. Safe. We’re safe.”

Wade sobbed. “It shouldn’t be me. It shouldn’t ever have been me.” In a heartbreaking whisper, Wade said: “I would’ve never been your choice. On the outside, you would’ve dated a nice girl. Had a fiancée to introduce to your aunt. If you weren’t in prison—”

"But we don't live in what-ifs," Peter interrupted him. "We live in the now."

"Live in the now? What are you, a self-help book?"

"You require more help than I do."

"You got that right. I'm the one with a psychiatric profile."

"You're the one with *me*. Okay? You're the one I've chosen. The one I'm happy with."

"Happy? With me?" Wade barked out a harsh laugh. "You're nineteen. You don't understand what happiness is."

"And you do? Mister Misery And Woe?"

"Mister..." Wade rested his forehead against Peter's. "Fine, you win. You bring even a sad ballsack like me happiness; you must have a Ph.D in joy."

"That's more like it. Award me with non-existent accolades."

"Is that your way of telling me you have a praise kink?"

Peter planted an obnoxiously noisy smooch on Wade's left cheekbone. "Yes."

Wade's shaking was subsiding, as if he'd been dipped in freezing water but Peter's heat was seeping into him, easing him. "This has been the most convoluted kink negotiation ever."

"Have lots of them, do you?"

"Kinks? Yeah. Negotiations? No."

Peter quirked an eyebrow.

“Uh. Not because I don’t negotiate,” Wade said hurriedly. “More like, there hasn’t been anyone to negotiate with? Until you? Um.”

“Relax, Wade. I’m not accusing you of being a... non-negotiator.”

“You’re an awesome negotiator. You got Pedro to back you up. That’s amazing.”

Peter hummed. “How about we forget about negotiating for a while? I could go for some necking.”

And so they did. Wade had to be coaxed into it, guilt-ridden and rattled as he was, but soon they were kissing, with Wade clutching Peter tightly to him, like Peter was as insubstantial as mist and might vanish at any moment.

Chapter 10

The prison library was deserted, aside from a bunch of Pedro's guards standing around with books and pretending to read. One of them was holding *Gardening For Beginners* upside-down.

It was both comedic and surreal, as so many things about jail were. Peter had never expected to find humor here, but there were bright veins of it amidst the darkness, little absurdities that caught the eye.

Like Tweedledee seriously browsing the self-help section while blocking the aisle that led to Pedro. If ever there was an underling who needed self-help, it was Tweedledee. And Tweedledum, Peter supposed, but Tweedledum was missing; he must be on an errand for Pedro.

"Heya," Peter said cheerfully, and Tweedledee grunted at him before shifting aside.

"Mr. Parker," Pedro greeted gravely, from where he sat behind the main desk. He ran the library, much like Peter ran the computer lab. "Please, have a seat. My felicitations on surviving yesterday's... incident."

"An incident I wouldn't have survived if it weren't for you." Peter perched on the chair in front of Pedro's desk. Uneasy as he was with conveying his gratitude to a mafia don, he did have manners. "Thank you."

Pedro gave a thin, reptilian smile. "You have nothing to thank me for."

Peter decided to cut to the chase. "Why are your men following me?"

"They're protecting my asset."

"I'm not an *asset*."

"No? Could've fooled me. You're of benefit to me and my organization." Slyly, Pedro observed: "I notice how you didn't argue being *my* asset."

"That—" Peter spluttered. "That didn't even strike me! Because I wasn't—I didn't even register that!"

"Of course, you will lose my protection if you prove to be useless to me." Pedro flicked a speck of lint off his sleeve. Was that a metaphor? Then again, everything Pedro did was a metaphor. That was just how he was.

Peter steeled himself for what he had to say; he hadn't liked Pedro's language of ownership, and the implication that Peter was his tool to use, for Pedro's own purposes. "I'm not just your personal asset. I'm not planning to restrict my activities to hacking the network for you; I plan

to do so for any inmate that needs to get in touch with their families.”

There was a brief, chilly silence, in which Pedro’s gaze went cold, like ice frosting over the surface of a lake. A deep, treacherous lake.

“As you wish,” he said eventually. “I acknowledge your independence.”

Peter got the distinct impression that Pedro was only caving because he was confident he could manipulate Peter into submission. It was eerie, because Peter couldn’t predict how Pedro was going to accomplish that, but he could predict that it would be unpleasant.

“You’re sharp, aren’t you?” Pedro steeped his fingers in such a classic super-villain style that Peter was tempted to roll his eyes. “What a game of chess this is going to be. It’ll be my pleasure to bring you to heel.”

“Even if you do, I’ll just become your Achilles heel.”

“Are you implying that you can weaken me?”

Peter winced. He was meant to be negotiating with Pedro, not threatening him. Not that Peter had anything to threaten him with. On the contrary, Pedro was Peter’s sole source of protection that wasn’t Wade. Which was, perhaps, Pedro’s first step in manipulating Peter. Peter already owed him. And until Peter got more bigwigs on his side, just to even up the scales, he’d have to be unfailingly polite to Pedro. At this stage, Peter wasn’t Pedro’s match; he couldn’t talk as if he was. “No. That wasn’t... I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.”

"You're forgiven," Pedro said generously, his quicksilver eyes warming again. "You are a novice, after all. I should let you play white."

Another allusion to chess. "I appreciate that," Peter said ironically.

Pedro must've detected that irony, because his smile widened. "Your courage cannot be questioned, speaking to me as you are. Your wisdom, however..."

"You're questioning my wisdom in challenging you, huh? Except I'm not challenging you."

"No, you are merely refusing my patronage. I am not a man who is often refused, Mr. Parker."

Peter coughed. "Yeah, well. I'm not... accustomed to being offered, uh... patronage."

"Aren't you? Associating yourself with Deadpool was a masterstroke, and your control of him is admirable."

Peter falling in love with Wade hadn't been a tactical decision, even if Peter's posturing with Wade had been, at the beginning. But if thinking of Peter as Machiavellian predisposed Pedro to respecting him, Peter wasn't going to contradict that. Not surrounded by Pedro's thugs as he was. He had to successfully clinch this negotiation, get out of the library, and get back to Wade. Preferably in one piece. "Thanks."

"If you could accept Deadpool's far more intimate patronage, my professional patronage should be easier to accept."

"But it'd shut out other convicts who have just as much of a right to communicate with their relatives."

"Are you under the delusion that you can bring justice to this prison, Mr. Parker? That you can bring equality to an institution founded on inequality?"

"Are we having a philosophical discussion, now?"

"Your morality is quaint."

"Your fondness for your grandmother is quaint," Peter shot back, before he could check himself.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Peter was dead. Deader than dead. So dead that they might as well conduct his funeral in this library. Because he wouldn't be leaving it. Pedro was going to summon his hounds to maul Peter to shreds. Pedro was going to have him cremated in the kitchen's largest oven. Pedro was—

Pedro was *grinning* at him?

"Oh, if only you could meet her," Pedro said. "She'd devour you whole."

"Your grandma is a shark?" Peter said incredulously.

"Now that's a compliment to sharks." Pedro chortled. "Hm. Entertaining as it is to banter with you, Mr. Parker—"

"We're bantering?"

"—we must conclude our business. I will give you three weeks to connect me with my famiglia and to pass the

iPhone of which you spoke to my representative, who will approach you at my behest. I assume Dopinder Singh will smuggle the iPhone into the lab for you to hook it up to the network."

"You... You know it's Dopinder." Peter had hoped Dopinder's identity would remain a secret.

"How could I not? Singh is the officer assigned to the computer lab." Pedro's tone was patronizing. "I am informed of every officer's role, major or minor, within this prison. When you mentioned that an officer would assist you, it wasn't difficult to deduce which officer that was."

So Pedro had corrupt jailors in his service, too. No wonder he did. He had millions of dollars to bribe them with. Peter was lucky to have the friendship of the non-corrupt Dopinder, who wasn't interested in bribes but in honoring his debt to Wade. "I'll have the phone for you."

"Excellent."

"Will your guards continue, erm—" *stalking me?* "Following me?"

"Not only that, but you'll find them stationed at the entrance of your cell prior to your exit from it. I suggest you wait for them to arrive before leaving, whether it is for mealtimes or for bathing."

Why did it feel like this was more about Pedro keeping track of Peter's movements than it was about Pedro protecting him? Peter couldn't argue, though, particularly when he and Wade gained from Pedro's supervision.

"Okay," he said reluctantly.

"I wouldn't be so intrusive, but your caretaker is obviously incompetent."

"My... You mean Wade?"

Pedro appeared impressed that Peter dared to address the infamous Deadpool by name. Gosh, it was like Wade was Voldemort or something. He Who Must Not Be Named.

"Indeed, I did mean Deadpool. But," Pedro added warningly, "I wash my hands of him if he makes any further unforced errors, such as going on a crusade against the Nazis. I sympathize with his anti-Nazi sentiments, but I have no resources to spare to protect the two of you from skinheads seeking vengeance en-masse."

"En... En-masse?" Peter said faintly.

Pedro considered Peter, then sighed, as if it irked him to have to give genuine advice to a newbie like Peter, but Peter was so hapless that Pedro had to do it even if it was annoying. "Have you ever bothered reflecting on the signals you send? Here, every action of yours sends a signal. In defending that Jewish man, isolated and without power as he was, you and Deadpool have sent a signal to the rest of the prison—a signal that you will save victims of injustice regardless of their lack of power or their inability to repay you."

"How could somebody like Smokes repay us?"

"Precisely. He couldn't. But you saved him anyway. Charming as your altruism is, it will win you enemies in high places—because people in high places are only in those places based on an economy of power, of favors exchanged, of deals made. You made no deals when you took down a skinhead and rescued an old man. You bribed no-one. You profited from no-one. You acted in a manner

that was unforeseeable. You acted in a manner that endangered the system."

Holy crap. So in the prison's Alignment Chart, Peter and Wade had become Chaotic Good? "And that's... that's bad?"

"Not only will the skinheads bear a grudge against you, but so will those who profit from the system as it stands."

Peter gulped. "Isn't that also you?"

"Clever lad," Pedro said approvingly. "Yes. That is also me."

"But you're not going after me because I can offer you a connection to your family."

"Cleverer and cleverer."

"What's to say I won't get them all to lay off me by offering the same to them?"

"But will you offer the same to them?"

"What?"

"Think about it. Will you offer the same to the skinheads? The pedophiles? The rapists? Will you offer *everyone* equal access to your just and noble kingdom of Camelot? Will everyone be accepted at your Round Table, in spite of their crimes?"

Peter stared. He honestly hadn't pondered that. He hadn't gotten beyond the technicalities of hacking the network. At most, he'd harbored a vague notion of helping everybody who missed their folks, but it hadn't occurred to him that not everybody who missed their folks might be deserving of

his help. This was a jail, for god's sake. How could Peter not have discerned that?

"Methinks Deadpool would not be best pleased with that, given his hatred of Nazis and sexual assaulters. And methinks you, darling boy that you are, would not favor aiding them either." Pedro spread his hands. "So what will it be, Mr. Parker? Is your dream of equality sustainable? Or is affiliating yourself with a more acceptable party—like myself—better for all involved?"

"You're a bastard," Peter marveled. So this was the next step in Pedro's manipulation of him. "A magnificent bastard, but still."

Pedro laughed. "And you're a promising novitiate. I'd rather you lived long enough to become a promising ally."

"And that's up to you, is it? How long I live?"

"It's up to your Daddy. If he can't keep himself out of trouble, I can't do it for him."

"That wasn't what I was asking, and you know it."

Pedro regarded him serenely. "You ought to drop by for a more literal game of chess, someday. It'll be fun."

"I'm not into your concept of fun."

"You weren't into Deadpool's concept of fun initially, I suspect. And now look at you."

"Please don't," Peter muttered, and got up. "Goodbye, Mr. Corleone."

“Goodbye,” said Pedro, and resumed flipping through the library catalog full of numbers as if it were a mafia ledger in disguise.

Who knew? Maybe it was.

Chapter 11

Wade was hovering just beyond the library door, like an anxious husband hovering outside a delivery room. As soon as Peter emerged, he blurted: "How'd it go?"

"No clue." Peter started down the hallway with Wade in tow, pretending that they weren't being shadowed at a discreet distance by Tweedledum's shorter cousin. The distance was, thankfully, out of earshot. "I think he likes

me? But he won't have any scruples about killing me if he has to."

Wade snarled. "I'll end him before he even gets to you."

"Chill, buddy. He hinted at playing chess with me in the future, which indicates I have a future. The guy can't say a damn word that isn't laden with multiple meanings. I've been reading between the lines so much I've gone cross-eyed."

"But he did say the deal's still on."

"He did!" Peter gloated.

Wade high-fived him.

When they got back to their cell and were freed from their Pedro-mandated chaperone, Peter immediately trudged to his bunk for a lie-down. He was as exhausted as if he'd just walked a tightrope. His pulse was still thready after that near-death experience. Because it had been a near-death experience, despite Pedro's flawless etiquette. Peter had felt it in his gut.

But before Peter could climb up to his bunk, Wade said:
"Hey, Pixie."

Peter turned slowly. "What did you call me?"

"Well, you're magical. And tiny." Wade shrugged. "Besides, the prisoners expect me to give you a pet-name. You're my, er—"

"Your bitch?" Peter said icily.

"Nah," said Wade, in a small, terrified voice. "Pretty sure *I'm* your bitch."

Peter broke character, erupting into giggles. "Wade. Wade, why d'you get so alarmed when I do that?"

"Because it's too convincing," Wade huffed. "And you're... You make a formidable queen bee."

"I dunno whether to be more baffled by you comparing me to female royalty or by you comparing me to an arthropod." Peter contemplated the possibilities. "But if I am an arthropod, I'm a spider. Hacking into the web, get it?"

"Is that what I should call you, then? Spider-Baby?"

"Spider-*Man*."

"That's, like, a comic book character's name. It's corny as heck."

"Deadpool's even cornier."

"Point."

Peter leaned against the ladder leading up to his bunk. Yeah, he needed a lie-down, but wouldn't a lie-down with Wade be more enjoyable? "Um, can we... Can we share your bunk?"

"Peter..." Wade fidgeted. "It's not a great idea for us to share a bed."

"We won't be sharing it all night. This is just... lying down. At midday. With our uniforms on. No hanky-panky."

Wade snorted skeptically. "That's a recipe for disaster."

"A disaster in our pants?" Peter joked, and Wade wavered.

"You're too cute to resist," Wade grumbled. He got into the bunk after Peter did, and settled facing him. "There. Happy?"

"Blissful." And Peter was. This was so nostalgic, like schoolboys having a sleepover; there was a comfort to it, an innocence. Peter nuzzled into Wade's pillow, inhaling Wade's scent. Wade himself emanated that scent, mingled with a warmth that was irresistible. Peter nestled against him, and after a lull in which Wade likely debated whether or not this counted as "hanky-panky," Wade began stroking his hair. It was perfect.

Wade cleared his throat, awkwardly petting Peter's head. "Pedro didn't—do any—that is—"

"Nope." Peter reached down to squeeze Wade's hands in reassurance. "He didn't harass me like that. He just made me doubt my morals. Which, uh, I'm concerned he'll do each time I interact with him? Pedro's like the stereotypical devil on your shoulder. All urbane and sophisticated and persuasive."

"And what was he trying to persuade you to do?"

"Hack for him exclusively. Which, a hacker's a useful weapon to have, I guess? And if all the bosses in the prison are engaged in a constant arms race, then it makes sense that Pedro would wanna secure exclusive rights to the latest weapon in his arsenal. He wouldn't like it if his rivals had it in their arsenals, too. He didn't convert me, though."

"Why not?"

Peter shifted on the lumpy pillow. "'Cause I'm too freaking smart to buy into his bullshit. He told me that if I won't hack for everyone—like Nazis and child abusers—then I'm gonna have enemies anyway. Why not let him shelter me from them?" Peter scoffed. "But I'm like... If I become useful to every other individual and group, then I'll still have more allies than enemies. The math is still in my favor. Not completely in my favor, but enough that I should have the advantage over the few truly evil assholes I *won't* hack for. If they go against me, they'll piss off every dude in this joint that does get to say hi to his kids because of me."

Wade was silent for a while. "Sometimes you frighten me, Petey. I bet that's why Pedro's into playing chess with you. You could checkmate him. And he likes that."

"He can shove his chessboard up his—" Peter halted mid-sentence to calm himself down. "If it weren't for all the poker lessons you gave me, I would've flunked out today."

"No, you wouldn't have."

"Yep. I would've. Remember when we met? You said I couldn't bluff my way out of a paper bag."

"Now you can bluff your way out of a bank vault."

"On Mount Everest."

"In a fort."

Peter sniggered. "See, that? The credit for that goes to you."

"I'm... not proud of teaching you that."

"You should be. It's a survival skill. If you hadn't taught it to me, I wouldn't have survived."

"You don't give yourself enough credit."

"You don't give *yourself* enough credit," Peter retorted.

"No, it's you who—"

"No, it's you."

"No, it's..."

Peter put a finger on Wade's lips to shut him up.

Wade shut up.

He did that a lot, Peter realized. Normally, Wade wouldn't shut up at gunpoint—heck, he'd only chatter more—but Peter's touch was all it took to knock him out. Wade's eyes were always wide and stunned when Peter touched him, as though Wade couldn't bring himself to believe that Peter would touch him like that. That *anyone* would touch him like that, with care and tenderness.

So Peter kept touching him. He let his fingertips drift over Wade's features, craggy and pitted as they were, with knots of scar tissue thickening the flesh unevenly. It wasn't a beautiful face. Yet it was dear to Peter, mobile and expressive and vibrant as it was, more *alive* than anybody else's. Now, filled with wonderment at Peter's nearness, it was even dearer.

"Do the scars still hurt?" Peter murmured, caressing the twisted ruin of Wade's mouth. He recalled what it had been like to kiss, and his breath hitched.

"No," Wade said, sounding drugged, his lips moving against Peter's palm. He kissed it, and it was an absent gesture, Wade's eyes half-shut as Peter's fingers slid along his jaw, feather-light. "No, they never... It's only when you touch them that they... hurt. But it isn't a physical pain," Wade clarified, before Peter could withdraw. Wade smiled, and it was a strange, rueful smile, stretching his scars out of true. "It's the pain of feeling too much."

Peter had to kiss Wade after that. He just had to, because if his kisses could draw away that pain—lift it, lighten it—then he'd do whatever he could.

When he brushed his lips against Wade's, Wade shivered. Their mouths parted against each other, a slow, slick deepening that grew hotter and sweeter as the minutes passed. They scarcely ever paused for air; Peter's lungs burned from a lack of oxygen, but he ignored them. There was a quiet fire building within him, making him flush with heat, the friction of his clothing against his skin becoming unbearable. He squirmed, and every needy, cut-off whimper he uttered inspired a corresponding groan from Wade.

Peter grabbed Wade's shirt, rolling onto his back and tugging Wade on top of him. Wade's weight above him pressed their groins together and Peter bucked, helpless not to. God, it was so good, so *right*, and Peter was so close —

Peter moaned in frustration when Wade stopped him, seizing Peter's wrists and pinning them to the bed.

"No." Wade's voice was like bedrock, solid and uncompromising. It was also rough with want, and Peter shuddered to hear it. "Peter. You said we wouldn't."

“Oh, c’mon.” Peter tried dislodging Wade’s grip and failed. Perversely, it only drove Peter wilder, that Wade could not be budged, that Wade was so strong he could overwhelm Peter whenever he wished. “It’s just kissing.”

“If you keep—” Wade swore as Peter bucked again “—fuck, *doing* that, it won’t just be kissing anymore. It’ll be much more than that.”

Butterflies fluttered nervously in Peter’s stomach. “Just let me c-come.” He blushed at having to beg for it, at having to say it. He’d never said it before, not out loud and not like this, with a plea that trembled as it left him. “Please. We don’t have to take our clothes off. It doesn’t have to be sex —”

“It’ll be sex. Trust me, Peter. It’ll still be sex, and it’ll still feel like sex, and it’ll still mess you up on the inside like sex. If you aren’t ready for it—”

“I’ve *been* ready! And you know I trust you!”

Wade exhaled lengthily. “Okay,” he said at last, after Peter had been stewing in his own hormones for approximately fifteen million years. “But our shirts and our trousers stay on, and our hands don’t stray. Deal?”

“Deal,” Peter replied. He was so hard it ached. And so was Wade; Peter could see it, tenting Wade’s pants like a goddamn Erector Set. How Wade could have such self-discipline with a boner like that was beyond Peter. Maybe it was because Wade was in his thirties and wasn’t a virgin; all Peter’s inexperienced brain could do was replay Wade saying ‘sex’ on repeat.

Peter had permission, now. Permission to grind them together, and that was what he did, bringing his knees up

to cradle Wade, seeking out Wade's mouth for more kisses. And Wade gave them to him—stinging, hungry bites that wandered down the column of Peter's neck—bites that were almost angry, almost feral.

Almost.

It wasn't enough. Wade still held himself above Peter, and his tightening, increasingly bruising grasp on Peter's wrists was the only reaction he had to Peter crushing their erections together. It was as if Wade was still controlling his lust, letting Peter rut against him but staying unmoving himself, and it made Peter so desperate that he bit at Wade's lips vengefully, demandingly.

Soon there was a litany of "please, please, please" escaping Peter in hot, breathless puffs, and that was what finally got to Wade, what finally made Wade snap and grind *back*, rocking against Peter so powerfully that the bunk creaked with the force of it.

Peter choked on a scream. His limbs spasmed, his legs twining around Wade's waist as his body surged *up*, meeting every drive of Wade's hips with one of his own. His ankles locked instinctively behind Wade's back, giving Peter the leverage to thrust upward again and again.

Damp cotton weave was all that there was between them, thin layers of poor, prison-quality material ground to nigh-transparency. The shape of Wade's cock was tangible through it, huge and hard and scary, and yes, it was leaking, although Peter couldn't tell which of them was leaking more, because the fabric between them was so sticky.

It got even stickier when Peter's dick spurted pre-come. "More, more, m-more," he babbled, and Wade growled.

The growl set Peter off, because that was how Wade growled when he was about to *break* someone.

And Peter... Peter was the only person here to be broken.

Peter came, and it slammed into him like a tidal wave, dragging him under, gasping and drowning. He spilled in his pants, soaking them in a wet flood that Wade must've been able to feel, because Wade jolted like he'd been electrocuted.

"Fuck," Wade cursed. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*."

Before Peter could even finish coming, Wade hauled himself up and off the bunk, staggering to the toilet concealed behind a metal panel in their cell. It was the only partition the cell had, its sole pretense at privacy.

Peter curled up on the mattress, panting. Aftershocks still raced through him as he heard Wade jerking off—sloppy, brutally fast and obscenely audible. Peter was too spent for his prick to do more than twitch in response.

The taps squeaked on and off, and then Wade returned, red-faced and penitent and bearing a towel.

"You, um." Wade sat beside Peter on the bed, but he sat right on the edge, as though he would leap off at the slightest evidence of disapproval from Peter, or if Peter so much as said 'boo.' Wade's expression was a hilarious mixture of worry and afterglow. "Are you... Do you..."

"I'm fine, except for how what you did was totally unfair."

Wade paled.

“Not the sex part,” Peter said quickly. Shit. “The not-getting-to-see-you-come part.”

Wade went back to being red. He was switching colors like the neon bulbs in a strip-club sign. “That was—it wouldn’t’ve been—”

“Why don’t you gimme the hug you owe me for leaving me alone?”

“I...” Wade wrung the towel. “Shouldn’t we... clean you up, first?”

Peter smirked. And hooked his thumbs into the elastic of his pants. “You offering?”

“No! I mean, you can clean up and I can join you, after? For the hugging. Just the hugging.” Wade deposited the towel on the bunk like a pet dog gingerly depositing a gift on the bed of its owner, and turned to stare fixedly at the door.

It was as if Wade was re-establishing their boundaries, as if he was reassuring Peter that Wade still respected him, that Wade wasn’t going to attack him at every opportunity now that they’d had sex.

Which was adorable, all this respectful bashfulness after they’d humped like rabbits—weirdly adorable, yeah, but what about them wasn’t weird? Peter’s post-coital attitude wasn’t any less bizarre, casual as it was. He’d presumed there would be some profound change in their relationship after having sex, but it wasn’t all that different. Wade was still Wade, and Peter was still Peter. They were just closer, that was all.

It was proof that Wade had been right all along, that waiting until they’d been ready had ensured that sex

wouldn't disrupt their bond, but would only enhance it. Peter was as comfortable with Wade as he'd ever been. Perhaps even more so.

Peter deliberately supplied all the breathy, pornographic sound effects he could get away with while cleaning himself up, and was rewarded by the sight of Wade going red all the way to his ears.

Score.

Chapter 12

It was Visitation Day. Peter was escorted to the visiting room by a guard and, more subtly, by Pedro's appointed minion. Today, it was Tweedledee who lurked behind every corner that Peter turned. The guard, if he noticed, didn't let on. Perhaps he—along with half the employees in this prison—was also in Pedro's pay.

The visiting room was crowded, as always. The inmates sat on rickety stools opposite their visitors, mostly women and children, who were separated from them by transparent, fingerprint-smudged dividers. Men whose faces usually appeared carved from stone were showing emotions they rarely did, their facades cracking under the weight of

simple affection as they never did under the weight of force. Those emotions humanized them, disarmed them. Sorrow. Longing. And, most transforming of all, joy.

This was why it was so important to Peter that he succeed in his hacking—not for profit or politics or ambition, but for *this*. For restoring some humanity to those who otherwise had few reasons to retain it. Despair could drive men to more violence than any material temptation. If Peter could give them faith—if he could give him more moments like these, where they could see the smiles of their kids—then he might fundamentally reform the system itself.

Or he might just be found dead in a corridor, somewhere, with Pedro's metaphorical knife sticking out of his back.

Peter's internal monologue screeched to a halt when he saw who his visitor was.

It wasn't Aunt May.

Spotting Gwen on the other side of his designated plastic screen was a surprise, and not an entirely pleasant one. Peter had yearned to see Gwen, of course he had, but he'd hoped, illogically, that she wouldn't see *him*. Not like this. He was clad in a prison uniform, and that was bad enough, but that wasn't the most jarring change in him. He knew that his eyes had hardened, that they had a harshness and an oldness they didn't have before.

He didn't want Gwen to see that.

But she did, and she flinched, like Peter had struck her.

Peter sat down. Looked at her. And let her look at him.

It was as if years had passed since they'd last met. Gwen was somehow sunlit even in this grim, dismal environment—there was a light within her and around her, a light that had once drawn Peter in but now was blindingly bright. It was just so foreign to this place, so unsuited to it, to the darkness within which Peter now dwelled. Or perhaps it was within Peter that the darkness dwelled. Looking at Gwen was like looking at the sun. It hurt.

What must he look like, to her? Was he as dark as a bruise? As a shadow? He was no longer a resident of the above-ground paradise she hailed from. He was a resident of the sewers.

There was no sunlight, here. There were no gardens. No neatly-mowed lawns.

Peter realized that in the past many months, he hadn't encountered a single blade of grass. It was an incongruous realization, given the context, and it jarred him to the core.

Much as he was jarring Gwen.

"Peter," Gwen began, and seemingly ran out of words. Her hands were shaking. Peter did her the mercy of pretending they weren't and focused on her cheerful yellow dress, which had small brown flowers on it. It was the dress Gwen had worn to Peter's eighteenth birthday party. He wondered if that was why she'd worn it. To honor the memory of the friendship they'd had.

Still had?

"Gwen." Peter addressed her as gently as he could. "Don't worry. I'm faring... far better than I expected, honestly. So don't act like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm—I didn't—" Gwen cut herself off. "I'm sorry I didn't visit you for so long."

"Gwen, it's fine."

"No. No, it's not. And I owe you an explanation." Gwen visibly composed herself. "I just... I persuaded myself that I shouldn't waste your visits when you were only permitted a visitor per week. Aunt May had more of a right to visit you, didn't she? Didn't you need her more than you needed me?"

"Gwen..."

"But those were all excuses." Gwen squared her shoulders and sat up, her customary confidence returning to her, her courage. Peter had always envied her that courage. "The truth was, I felt guilty," Gwen admitted. "I *was* guilty."

"Not in a court of law," Peter joked, and Gwen gawked at him.

"Peter!"

"What, I can't joke about my own incarceration?" Peter shrugged. "And anyway, how are you even remotely guilty for me winding up in prison? Last time I checked, you're not Norman Osborn. Unless he's discovered how to shapeshift. Which, er, I hope he hasn't."

"Peter. Be serious."

"I am serious." It was just that Wade was rubbing off on him. Literally and figuratively. "If Osborn can shapeshift, we're all screwed. Have we done DNA tests on the president, lately? What if he isn't who he says he is?"

"*Peter*. I'm trying to make a confession."

"I ain't no priest and this ain't no confessional, but go ahead." Was it just Peter, or were his mannerisms beginning to resemble Wade's?

Gwen glowered at him. Apparently, she didn't appreciate Peter's cavalier attitude. "The reason I felt guilty was because I wasn't doing a thing to help you." She leaned forward, her features set in the kind of determination that generally boded ill for anybody on the receiving end of it. "Now, I am."

"You're what?"

"Helping you."

Peter's stomach plummeted. "No." He shook his head vigorously. "Gwen, no. Whatever it is you're planning—"

"I'm still an intern at Oscorp. I'm your spy on the inside. And I'm going to prove your innocence, Peter. Just you wait."

"You—you don't have to do that. You *shouldn't* have to do that. You've got a life to live, Gwen."

"And you don't?" Gwen argued. God, when she was pissed off, she was impossible to beat. "You have a life to live, too, Peter. A life that Norman stole from you. I won't rest until you get it back."

"Maybe..." Peter thought of Wade's kisses, their softness, their sweetness. "Maybe I have more of a life in here than you think I do."

"You can't mean that." Gwen peered at him, uncertainty creeping into her resolve. "Can you? What are you saying, Peter? How can you tolerate staying in prison? You could be going to college."

"Technically, I could still be going to college. Via correspondence courses. I've been considering it."

"And you're willing to spend eight years completing correspondence courses? Eight *years*?" Gwen paled. "Given what I—what I've read of prisons—"

"I'm not being raped," Peter stated flatly.

"For how long?" Gwen insisted. "How long can you go before you're subjected to some form of brutality, be it sexual or not? How can I, as your friend, sit back and watch it happen?"

"Gwen—"

"You'd do the same for me," Gwen said stubbornly.

Crap. She was right. Peter couldn't even contradict her, because then he'd be lying, and she'd be just as aware of it as him. "And what are you plotting to do? You hoodwinking Norman is like a mouse sneaking under the radar of an owl. It won't happen."

"It'll happen. Trust me, it'll happen." Gwen's eyes gleamed with tenacity. A frankly frightening amount of tenacity. "I've begun to understand why Norman framed you for intellectual property theft. He did it to justify why so many of his crucial files went missing."

"Lemme guess," Peter drawled. "He vanished them away himself?"

“Bingo.” Gwen made finger-guns at him. *Finger-guns*. Peter chuckled. “They were files Norman preferred to conceal, even if, legally, he was required to disclose all files created for a government program *to* the government.”

“The government?” Peter was confused. “Oscorp doesn’t do government contracts.”

“Except that it has been doing them. Secretly. I only found out after snooping around in the PR department. There’s a press release in the works about how Oscorp is proud to announce a groundbreaking new venture with the federal government, a venture that it’s been covertly working on for about four years. They’ve kept it on the down-low for ‘security purposes,’ or at least that’s what their official statement is. It’ll be all over the newspapers, soon—Norman in a convenient photo-op with the chief of the CIA, shaking hands with America’s leaders and branding himself a visionary. A visionary?” Gwen stuck out her tongue. “Blegh.”

“Norman is a visionary, though. He envisioned me in jail, and here I am, just as he envisioned.”

“That isn’t all he envisioned. This program that Oscorp’s about to launch with the government? It’s named Project Rebirth.”

“Wow,” Peter said. “That doesn’t sound suspicious at all. Or like it’s from an X-Men movie.”

“I know, right?” Gwen rolled her eyes. “It’s such a typical, only-a-supervillain-could-come-up-with-it name.”

“Didn’t Wolverine get subjected to a ‘project’ like that?”

For about two minutes, all Peter and Gwen did was snigger. But then, glancing at the clock, Gwen sobered up and resumed her story. "It's troubling, Peter. Very troubling. Troubling for America and for the entire planet. Because Oscorp is collaborating with the military to build America an invincible army. An army that cannot die. An *undead* army."

"A what, now?" Peter boggled. "Have I died and woken up in a comic book?"

"No, Peter, I'm afraid you haven't. And that isn't even the worst of it." Gwen passed a hand over her eyes, as if she couldn't bear what she was about to say. "The government can't publicly exploit soldiers as guinea pigs, and upstanding citizens are out of the question. So can you guess who it is that Norman's going to be experimenting on, to make them impervious to death?"

It all clicked in Peter's brain. "Inmates. Prison inmates."

"You got it. Specifically, inmates on death row or with life sentences, who will walk free if they agree to participate in the program."

"*If* they can walk free at all."

"Yes. Chances are, they won't survive the experiments." Gwen sighed. "But it's deemed acceptable to kill them if they volunteer. If they themselves sign off on their lives."

"Yikes. Talk about the prenup from hell."

"The special hell, even." Gwen grimaced in disgust. "My hunch is that the files Norman vanished away—that he framed you for stealing—are files regarding Project Rebirth that he *didn't* intend to disclose to the government."

The implications began to dawn on Peter. "Which indicates he's doing something that the government won't approve of." He marveled at Gwen's deduction. "Gwen, you're a genius."

"Thanks!" Gwen beamed. "So are you."

"Yeah, real genius-like of me, to get caught for a crime I didn't even commit and had no clue about."

"That was why Norman chose you as his scapegoat. He selected you because you were low enough on the food-chain for him to eliminate you without consequences. But he was wrong. He didn't count on you having allies."

"You mean nutjobs. Self-sacrificing nutjobs." Peter frowned. "Wait, allies *plural*? Who else is involved in your harebrained conspiracy?"

"You just called me a genius," Gwen pointed out. "My conspiracies can't be that harebrained, can they?"

"Gwen. Who. Else."

"Ned." Gwen fidgeted with her dress. "He's gotten into that internship he was aiming for."

"The [CIA internship](#)?" The pieces of Gwen's puzzle were slotting together a tad too quickly for Peter's peace of mind. It couldn't be that easy. It just couldn't. "Shit. I bet he thinks that gives him the perfect opportunity to hack into Project Rebirth for me, to sniff out what Norman Osborn's hiding."

"That was Ned's precise phrase for it. With the sniffing. So you still have that pseudo-telepathic connection with him? Nice."

Peter ignored her nonsense. "He can't do that, Gwen! *You* can't do that! It's illegal!"

"What is moral and what is legal doesn't always intersect."

"Explain that to the cops. God damn it," Peter muttered.

"Why am I surrounded by vigilantes?"

Gwen regarded him curiously. "Who else is a vigilante?"

"My kooky cellmate." Peter massaged his forehead; he was acquiring a headache. "I can't believe it. You roped Ned into this?"

"Ned isn't getting 'roped into' anything. He's your friend, too, jackass. We came up with this together."

"Ned might be a slicker hacker than me, but going up against the government? Come off it, Gwen. If he gets caught, that's an actual crime. With actual jail-time. And you'll be an accessory to it, if Norman doesn't charge you with industrial espionage, first. Listen, I love you guys, but if you get arrested because of me then I will formally sever our friendship. What's worse than one of us in jail, Gwen? *All of us in jail*. Don't be a twit. Kindly inform Ned that I don't need an Edward Snowden in my camp. If he doesn't agree, he should visit me and I'll convince him personally."

"But we're making progress!" Gwen objected. "We could exonerate you!"

"Gwen. It's dangerous. Norman put me in jail. He could do the same to you. To the both of you. Please, don't do this. Leave OsCorp be and just—just don't."

"When have I ever let you—or any man, for that matter—tell me what to do?"

Peter gazed at her in defeat. As a final attempt at rationality, he asked, "What about Harry?"

"Fuck Harry."

Peter's eyebrows shot up. It probably wouldn't be appropriate to say, *I did figure you were fucking him*, but it must've shown on Peter's face, because Gwen went red.

"I'm not—we're not. Together. Anymore. Not as far as I'm concerned. He's gone to Oxford University to do his degree, just like his dad did, and I'm letting him assume I'm waiting for him. It suits my cover as the lovelorn fiancée awaiting his return. It's earned Norman's trust. To him, I'm an honorary member of the family."

Peter swallowed. "Is... Is that safe? If he finds out you're betraying him..."

"He won't find out. The asshole even patted me consolingly on the shoulder when I mentioned that I was visiting you. I said I was just doing it out of pity, because you used to be my friend, but I had no doubt you'd committed the crimes you were accused of. After all, there was so much evidence, and it all led to you."

"That's—that's a heck of a mental contortion you're pulling off there, Gwen. It's not like you. You can't sustain it forever."

"I can, and I will. You're not who you were before, Peter, but neither am I." Gwen's mouth twisted. "I don't love Harry anymore. He could've sided with us, with justice, because he goddamn well knew that his dad was a crook. But he didn't. He sold us out and sucked up to his father instead, like the sycophantic little heir he is, terrified of

losing his fortunes, because what would he be without them? Nothing,” Gwen spat. “*Nothing.*”

“Uh,” said Peter, rather taken aback. Even Aunt May hadn’t been this angry on his behalf. Or at least not this openly angry. “Okay.”

Gwen sucked in a calming breath. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “I have. Er. Rage issues.”

“No kidding.”

“Don’t *you?*” Gwen blurted. “I’ve barely been able to keep myself from throwing mugs at walls while here you’re trapped *in* walls, and you’re...” Gwen buried her face in her hands. Her voice, when it emerged, was tearful. “I just picture you being stuck in jail for days and days and years and years, and I can’t stand it. I can’t stand the injustice of it. How can you?”

Peter couldn’t answer for a couple of seconds. There was a strange, blistering surge of emotion within him, like the surging of a boiling, endless sea—and yes, perhaps it was the rage Gwen spoke of, that Peter couldn’t allow himself to feel. If he did, if his rage was all he had to cling on to in here, then he’d become it. It would be all he’d ever be. He’d become as vicious and heartless as the worst criminals in this prison.

And Peter couldn’t let himself become that. Not when he had Aunt May to go back to, a life to go back to. Not when he had Wade to love, to protect, just as Wade loved and protected him. That silent promise between them—the promise to be there for each other—could not be upheld if either of them succumbed to wrath, to the stifling futility of their empty, soul-crushing, repetitive lives. Peter had to be

strong for Wade, just as Wade was strong for him. It was an equal exchange.

"I'm sorry," Gwen said again, looking back up at Peter with watery eyes. "That was unfair. Obviously, you're angrier about it than anyone else. You're the person going through it."

Peter faltered. He couldn't quite meet Gwen's eyes, shining with compassion as they were. He looked down at his folded hands, thinner and bonier than he remembered them being. Prison food wasn't exactly nourishing. "I have no choice. If I start getting angry, I... I'm scared that I'll never stop. I just have to quit fixating on it and carry on."

Gwen sniffled. "Oh, Peter, that's terrible."

An uncomfortable lull fell between them. Peter hadn't been in love with Gwen for years, but even as the friends they currently were, the distance between them was greater than ever, a crevasse too wide for their best intentions to bridge.

Gwen wasn't just out of Peter's league, now; she was out of his world. Hers was a world where she could still microwave a bowl of buttery popcorn and settle down to a night of binge-watching Netflix in her flannel pajamas. Hers was a world where she could bundle herself up in a winter coat and take a stroll down to Central Park to enjoy the Christmas lights.

But Peter's was a world of perpetual stagnation, of constantly evading rape and lining up for tasteless dinners. He wasn't even sure he'd recall what popcorn tasted like, when he eventually got out. He couldn't walk anywhere on his own. He couldn't even see a sunset, if he wanted to,

because all he got to see of the sky from the exercise yard was an unchanging square of blue-gray at noon.

Peter was living in a box. An airless, lifeless box. It was roomy for a coffin, he supposed. The only glimmer of illumination in it—the only glimmer of hope—was Wade. Without Wade, wouldn't Peter be as good as dead? On the inside, if not on the outside? Wouldn't Peter have been ground to dust beneath the fists and the boots of the prisoners and the guards? Would even a smidgen of Aunt May's nephew be left in him? Even a hint of Gwen Stacy's friend?

Wade was keeping Peter alive, not just physically but emotionally. Even though Peter had just been with Wade an hour ago, he was already missing Wade—with a pang that he was suddenly certain was mutual. Wade was waiting for him. He had to get back.

"I wish I could hold your hand," Gwen said abruptly. "It's so bizarre, having this fake forcefield between us."

"We could still hold hands." Peter's lips twitched. "Like Kirk and Spock. Touching palms through the glass."

"Spock died in there, Peter. That's awful!"

"Or Kirk died, in the new movie."

"Ugh, the reboot." Gwen wrinkled her nose. "Don't speak of it again."

"So you're a Star Trek purist? Tsk, tsk. Do your classmates in med school know what a nerd you are?"

"Yes, Peter," Gwen said patiently, finally managing a smile, wobbly though it was. "They know I'm a nerd. We're in med

school. We're all nerds."

Peter lifted his hand and pressed it against the divider, his fingers parted in traditional Vulcan style. "Live long and prosper, Gwen."

"Live long and prosper." Gwen brought her own hand up, placing it right where Peter's was, on her side of the screen. The warmth of her skin wasn't palpable through the divider, which was cruelly, inhumanly cool. But Peter could imagine that warmth, dear and familiar—the warmth of a hand he had held so many times, when he'd mourned for Uncle Ben, and when Aunt May had fallen sick and he'd been terrified he'd lose her, too. And then, lastly, before his trial against Norman Osborn.

Gwen had always been there for him. Why would now be any different?

A bell rang in the background, signaling that visitations were over, and Gwen jumped. "I... I have to go." Gwen clutched her purse to herself as she got up. "I'll visit you again, Peter. And I'll continue updating you about Project Rebirth."

"Forget about that and focus on school. You and Ned, both." Jesus, they were incorrigible. Peter cherished their loyalty, but not if it got them thrown in jail. "I'll be all right in here," Peter reassured her. "I have... I have a friend. A guardian, of sorts."

"So May told me." Gwen hovered hesitantly until a guard threw open the door and hustled her out. She disappeared in a swirl of yellow dress and golden hair.

Peter stared at the plastic pane, upon which the foggy impressions of Gwen's fingertips were swiftly fading, like

ghosts.



Chapter 13

When Peter entered their cell, Wade was shuffling his cards. It was a case of déjà vu for Peter, a flashback to their initial meeting—Wade, sitting at the table, playing cards with himself. “Nobody visits you, do they, Wade?”

“Hm?” Wade blinked. “Nah. Well, Vanessa did. But I asked her not to.”

“Why not?”

Wade scratched his head. “Didn’t need her all hung up on me when she could be moving on. Why, what did your aunt say?” He winked. “Did she suggest you find a girlfriend on Meet-An-Inmate.com?”

“There’s a website for that? Never mind,” Peter answered his own question. “There’s a website for everything.”

Wade swiveled around in his chair and bounced his knee excitedly; he’d become attached to Aunt May by proxy. “So how’d it go, Petey? How’s Auntie May doing? Did she get that promotion she’d been gunning for?”

“I dunno. It wasn’t my aunt who was there.” Peter braced himself for Wade’s reaction. “It was Gwen.”

Wade dropped his cards. “That chick you crushed on in school?”

Peter squinted at him. “Crushed on, as in the past tense. You’re not insecure about me talking to her, are you?”

"Who, me?" Wade tittered nervously. "I, er. I wouldn't know insecurity if it bit me in the ass."

"Oh, it's definitely biting you in the ass. I can see it hanging off your rear end."

"Dang, you nasty. You've been ogling my rear end?"

"Wade. You're projecting again."

"Aw, that's disappointing. You *don't* ogle my ass?"

"I'm more interested in, um." Peter's ears burned. "What's in the... the front."

Wade whistled. "That's even nastier."

"No, it's not!"

"So you agree it's nasty. Just not nastier?"

Peter snorted. He debated informing Wade about what Gwen and Ned were up to, but ultimately chose to delay his announcement until that night, just so he could decide how to divulge it.

Knowing Wade, he'd approve of Gwen's and Ned's newfound vigilantism. Peter had to shore up his arguments against it just to keep Wade from, like, writing them encouraging letters and declaring them bridesmaid and best man at his and Peter's imaginary future wedding.

"Gwen's just my friend. Honestly." Peter doggedly guided their conversation back to its original topic, because if he didn't, Wade would persist in digressing until they didn't discuss what they had to. It was an excellent avoidance tactic. "I'm happy to know that she and Ned still care about

me, that I still have friends. That I still have Aunt May. It's just..." Peter leaned against the metal frame of their bunk beds. It dug uncomfortably into his vertebrae.

Wade's expression switched modes from 'Oh No My Boyfriend Met His Ex' to 'Supportive Husband' in a fraction of a second. "It's important that you meet them, because they mean a lot to you, but... But it's also okay to acknowledge that seeing them makes you sad."

"Sad?" Peter laughed jaggedly. "I guess. But it isn't just about me missing them. Seeing them reminds me that I really am in jail. That this isn't *normal*. That out there, people are living and growing instead of rotting inside a—inside a—"

"Corpse's shell?"

Peter glared at Wade.

"Sorry. A guy's just gotta quote 'Thriller,' sometimes."

Through gritted teeth, Peter said, "A guy's just gotta be strangled by his cellmate, sometimes."

"Holy cripes. You're into that?"

"Wade."

"No, seriously. Never pegged you for a sadist." Wade tapped his chin contemplatively. "Pegging in general, though..."

"*Wade.*"

Wade waved at him encouragingly. "My apologies. Carry on."

“Thanks for interrupting my tragic monologue.”

“I said I was sorry. Sheesh.”

“What I was saying was...” Peter slumped. “Imagine you and me, out there. Waking up together to sunlight from a proper window. Making each other coffee. Going for a morning run. And then—and then going to work, and coming home to our crappy li'l apartment, maybe ordering in so we can make out on our sagging couch until dinner's delivered. Imagine us going grocery shopping, with you leering at the old checkout lady when she scans our condoms, and I have to elbow you to get you to stop.”

“That's... a weirdly specific and weirdly accurate description,” Wade said. “Because I would do that. I would totally do that.”

“You're not getting my point.” Peter exhaled gustily.

“Imagine us *living*. Just like everybody else.”

“We're living in here, too. Just not very well. But we are.”

“Are we? I mean, 'course we are, but—”

“Peter.” Wade's tone wasn't pitying. It was as if he shared Peter's pain, like he understood it—understood it how Gwen and Aunt May and Ned never would.

“It's just that...” Peter tugged at his hair in frustration.

“Left in here, between visits from Aunt May or Gwen, I start forgetting what life is actually like. What it's supposed to be like—boring and mundane and with just enough variety to keep us invested. It's not supposed to be this... this occasionally enjoyable nightmare, half-terror and half-ecstasy, the terror of being attacked and the ecstasy of

being loved. We could be so much more if we weren't in prison, Wade. So much more."

"Not me." Wade sagged. "*You* could. Hell, you could get into NASA. You have so much potential. It's practically leaking out of your ears."

"Like my brain?" Peter scoffed. "By the time I've served my sentence, I won't have a brain anymore."

"Yes, you will. Masterminding an invisible, technological prison mutiny will nourish your brain cells. As for me? My brain cells are all gone, Petey. I washed them away with alcohol and mindless violence."

Peter couldn't help a small grin. "What about mindless sex? We could be having it, you know. Right now."

"Using sex to escape our existential misery won't be healthy for our relationship," Wade said, like a goddamn relationship counselor.

"And suffering in unnecessary chastity is? Don't pretend you'd be satisfied with that, Wade."

"I ain't pretending." Wade cleared his throat. "I just... Whoa."

That *whoa* had been in response to Peter just sauntering up to Wade and... sinking onto his lap. "Bring back any fond memories?"

"Ha ha," Wade croaked weakly. "You haven't called me Daddy since then."

Peter wrapped his arms around Wade's neck and smiled down at him with an exaggerated, admittedly evil

sweetness. "Would you like me to?"

Wade's eyes went blank and glassy, as if he'd just been hit in the skull with a mallet and was experiencing a concussion. "Uh," said Wade, followed by another, "Uh."

Peter snickered. "Is that the only word you're capable of forming?"

"Peter," Wade said, almost pleadingly. It stole Peter's breath.

But before Peter could act, Wade was pushing Peter away and off his lap.

"Wha..." Peter frowned. "Why?" This confirmed his suspicions, then. Wade *had* been avoiding him ever since they'd had sex three days ago. He kept cock-blocking them. Today, evidently, was no exception. It couldn't be about Gwen, because Peter had only just seen her, and Wade had been avoiding him before that.

"It's—it's nearly lunchtime," Wade said. "When Pedro's goons get here, we'll go get lunch. Dunno about you, Pete, but I'm starving."

Not starving for me, apparently, Peter reflected resentfully. He'd have to suss out what had Wade tied up in knots this time, because it was becoming an annoying habit of his, withdrawing whenever he and Peter made any progress. It was always two steps forward, one step back.

But no more. Peter would get to the bottom of this.

No pun intended.

“Wade,” Peter said flatly, “it’s still an hour and a half until lunch.”

Wade coughed. “Don’t they say not to exercise a couple of hours before a meal?”

“That’s exercise. I’m talking about sex.”

“Sex is exercise. Very strenuous exercise.”

That did it. It was such a pathetic excuse. The only reason for Wade not being into having sex with him was that Peter must’ve been terrible at it. “You genuinely don’t want me, huh? Was I so bad at it? Did I...” Peter flushed in humiliation. “Did I do it wrong?”

Wade gaped at Peter. “Wrong?” He shook his head. “If you’d done it any more right, I’d have detonated like a bomb.”

“That’s disturbingly violent imagery for sex.”

“I *felt* disturbingly violent.” Wade was all but radiating shame. “And I... I was too rough with you. I bruised you. Your wrists look like someone was assaulting you. It was your first time, and rather than being giving, I just fucking —*took*.”

“Is that why you’ve been avoiding me?” Peter demanded incredulously. “Because you’re feeling guilty about blowing my mind?”

“That wasn’t—”

“That was exactly what you did, and I loved it.”

“Still. We shouldn’t jump into having sex everyday like there isn’t—like there isn’t still stuff you have to learn. That I have to learn. That we have to learn. About each other.”

Peter got that Wade was trying to give Peter his space, but this was too much space. “You’re just scared that it’ll be too much for you,” he accused Wade boldly, with more audacity than he had. “That I’ll be too much for you. Because I already am. You’re scared shitless of how I make you feel.”

There was a drawn-out pause. “Damn,” Wade said eventually. “You got me, kid.”

“Don’t call me ‘kid’ when we’re about to have sex.”

“Hey, it wasn’t me who mentioned the daddy kink. And who said we’re about to have sex?”

“Me.” But this wasn’t about bullying Wade into going along with him, and Peter had to remind Wade of that. “Only... only if you want to, though. Do you want to?”

Wade had never seemed more conflicted. “It’s not about what I—”

“Yeah, it is.” Peter scowled. “It literally is. Because what *I* want isn’t in doubt.”

“Isn’t it? You were a virgin until three days ago. You can’t just leap into rampant debauchery like you’re some sorta sex guru. You have to wait for your feelings to catch up with you.”

“My feelings have more than caught up with me. In fact, they’re running ahead of me. If this was a marathon, they’d have won gold and I’d be lying by the side of the track, unconscious.”

"That's a hell of an extended metaphor."

"Not as extended as I could make your di—"

"*Do not* add 'dick' to that sentence."

"I will if I want to," Peter said mulishly.

"You've never even held another man's dick."

"And whose fault is that?"

Wade sighed. Like he had any right to be sighing!

"M-maybe," Peter offered tentatively, "if you're not comfortable with us doing it, we could start off with... looking?"

"L..." Wade's voice cracked. "Looking?"

"If—if you reckon we shouldn't be doing more touching. Maybe you could—if, if you didn't mind—you could—show me?"

"Show you what?" Wade asked faintly.

"What you do when you're, um. Masturbating." Peter's flush from before was returning with a vengeance. "We could... we could watch each other jerk off? That'd be hands-off enough for you, wouldn't it?"

Wade appeared to be temporarily incapable of language. He just sat there like a statue. A particularly stunned statue. "Shit," Wade said at last, with wonder and awe, like Peter had outwitted him in an obscure game of chess.

"C'mon," Peter cajoled him, darting down to peck Wade lightly on the lips and then retreating, because Wade had

indicated very strongly that he didn't intend for them to have further sexual contact. Not until later. Much later. Bastard. "Please? It won't be anything you don't want it to be. And, like I said, it won't just be you. To make it fair, I'll... I'll show you, too. I'll show you what I do."

"What you do," Wade repeated brainlessly. Then, he shook himself and said, "No. You—you don't have to put yourself on display for me. For the sake of my sanity, or whatever is left of it, *don't* put yourself on display for me."

But Peter wasn't giving up. "I will, if that's what it takes to get you naked."

Wade pinched the bridge of his nose. "Peter... This isn't about equivalency. It isn't a trade. If you'd like to see me naked, that doesn't mean you have to let me see you."

"No," Peter said obstinately. "It'll be unfair. And anyway, I..." He gulped. "I want to see what you... look like when you're... looking at me."

Wade's eyes darkened.

"Oh," Peter whispered. "*Oh*. If you're going to look at me like that... I... I haven't even taken off my clothes, yet."

"Jesus fucking Christ, Peter." Wade massaged his temples as if warding off a migraine. "This still counts as sex."

"According to you, even standing on opposite hemispheres of the planet counts as sex."

"It does with you."

"Am I meant to be flattered by that?"

“Yes?”

“That wasn’t an answer, Wade.” Peter began unbuttoning his shirt with shaking fingers, because if he didn’t initiate this, he’d lose his nerve. Wade was right about one thing; Peter had only recently lost his virginity, and there was only so far his confidence could go. “If you’re fine with this, then I’ll... I’ll go on.”

Wade had frozen again. His eyes were wide, disbelieving, following the movements of Peter’s fingers as if glued to them. It was only then that Peter truly comprehended the phrase ‘undressing me with your eyes,’ because that was obviously what Wade was doing, anticipating every inch of skin that Peter uncovered. Peter’s pulse stuttered.

“You... You’ve got to stop me.” The top few buttons of Peter’s shirt were now undone, sagging open and revealing his collarbones. “If you’re not into this, you’ve got to stop me, Wade.”

“Me?” Wade rasped. “Stop you? When have I ever been able to do that?”

So Peter didn’t stop. Once his shirt was off, Peter discarded it on the floor and backed up, reclining gingerly on the lower bunk so he could pull off his pants without hopping around like an uncoordinated loser.

Wade didn’t seem to think he was a loser. Wade, on the contrary, had gone completely scarlet, like he’d been scalded with boiling water. His scars stood out starkly, pale against all that flaming red.

Finally, with a somewhat awkward tug, Peter kicked his pants and his underwear aside.

He was exposed.

Wade stared at him as if at a revelation.

Peter fought not to hug himself, not to hide his thin, unimpressive frame from view. That would defeat the purpose of this whole endeavor. If he couldn't even do this—if he couldn't even be unclothed in front of Wade in a context that wasn't a daily prison-mandated shower—then Wade would never concede to having sex with him.

So, although his shyness insisted that he draw his legs up and together, Peter drew on every ounce of bravery he had and spread his legs apart.

Wade growled. It was a short, aborted growl, but a growl nonetheless. Wade's hands were white-knuckled on the armrests of his chair.

Peter was beginning to shiver. He wasn't sure if it was because the air was so cool, or if it was because he was so *hot*, his entire body alight with a slowly simmering blush that brought warmth to his cheeks even as his nipples pebbled in the cold.

And he was hard. He'd been getting hard ever since he'd begun stripping, but now he was fully, undeniably aroused. What made it worse—or better, infinitely better—was that Wade was watching him. "What... What do you see?" Peter asked unsteadily. "Tell me, Wade."

Wade didn't reply. He was panting. His pupils were blown, his gaze dangerously heated, frighteningly feral. He looked—god, he looked like he was starving. Like he was scarcely hanging on to his humanity.

It should've been intimidating, but it only ratcheted up Peter's heartbeat, striking a matching hunger in him, like to like. He trailed his fingers up his soft inner thighs, teasing himself, his shiver developing into a shudder when sparks of delight raced through him. "Wish... wish you were touching me like this," Peter gasped.

At that, Wade's stillness shattered. Groaning, he palmed himself roughly through his pants. He was as hard as Peter was, Wade's erection straining against the worn fabric of his prison uniform. "Wanna know what I see?" Wade said harshly, desperately. "I see a boy who has *no fucking idea* what he's doing to me."

"Then tell me." Peter couldn't look away from Wade, either. "No, don't just tell me. Show me."

Breathing raggedly, Wade tore off his shirt with a force that was almost vengeful. A button pinged off the table. Wade yanked his pants off with similar haste, falling back into his chair, his hand immediately closing around his bare cock. He pumped, once, and Peter's hips lurched upward as if Wade had done that to *him*.

"Fuck," Peter said, shocked. Wade was huge. Peter had known that, of course, but seeing Wade's mammoth proportions in private was nothing like seeing them in the showers, surrounded by strangers. Wade's pectorals flexed as he moved his hand, his biceps bunching rhythmically. It was hypnotic. Every serrated scar and bulging muscle was thrown into relief by the sole overhead lamp—and then there was Wade's cock, oozing pre-come, heavy and swollen and ruddy within Wade's grasp.

Peter's own prick dribbled, and he reached for it without taking his eyes off Wade. Wade's scars rippled, and in the

cell's customary dimness, they resembled the stripes of a tiger. Being watched by Wade was like being watched by a carnivore, by a large, fanged beast of prey just before it pounced.

If only Wade would pounce. Peter could picture it so easily—Wade getting off that chair and stalking toward Peter, predatory and intent, only to shove Peter down on the bed and climb atop him, mauling him so *gently*, with kisses and scratches and bites—

"Ah, *ah!*" Peter arched helplessly, unable to prevent those embarrassing exclamations from leaving him. Wade could hear them all—Peter's garbled moans and his startled, hitching whimpers. It should've made Peter bashful, but it only made him needy. Feverishly, incandescently needy.

Sweat trickled down Peter's back. The paths it charted were prickly and itchy, but a wilder, hotter, crueller itch had taken up residence inside him, like a barbed wire in his veins, twisting and spooling. It gathered in his lower belly, a distant echo of building pleasure, a warning of oncoming ecstasy, like lightning before a storm. Each sizzle of it through his nerves stoked the fire in him ever higher.

"S-say it, Wade," Peter stammered. "How... how do you want me to... t-touch myself?"

Wade cursed. "Your nipples," he said after a while, sounding wrecked, as if Peter had broken his will. "Touch—touch yourself there, oh, *fuck*, Peter—"

Peter obeyed instantly, hissing at the scrape of his thumbnail against his left nipple, the sensation raw and strangely vulnerable, strangely electric.

“Pinch them,” Wade continued deliriously, his eyes black with lust and self-loathing. “Pinch ’em hard enough for them to hurt. Pinch them like I would if I wasn’t so fucking in love with you that the thought of hurting you makes me hurt ten times more.”

“Wade,” Peter sobbed, and then cried out when he pinched his nipples with his spare hand. The harder he pinched them, the deeper they throbbed, going puffy and oversensitive and sore. They tingled like bee-stings when he released them. They’d darkened to the shade of overripe berries, and Peter could see Wade swallow at the sight of them, their obscenely dusky pink. They hurt, just like Wade had said they would. They hurt, but they hurt so *good*.

A sharp lance of yearning sliced through Peter, a yearning to have Wade do this to him, to have Wade hurt him like this. Just the image of it had Peter trembling at its sheer savagery, the savagery that Wade was confessing to, that Wade wanted to unleash on him. Oh, god. Wade *wanted*—

Peter’s dick was leaking so copiously that his palm was slick with it, each glide of it frustratingly slippery. He tightened his grip on himself, noting that Wade was doing the same—that Wade was quickening the strokes of his own cock, his eyes darting between Peter’s nipples and Peter’s face. Wade’s chest rose and fell under a sheen of perspiration. It gleamed, and Peter longed to taste it, to taste the saltiness and muskiness of Wade’s desire.

“Wanna... Wanna run my tongue down your chest,” Peter babbled. “All the way down to your—your stomach, your—”

Wade’s stroking faltered only to resume even faster, even rougher, like he was punishing himself. “Don’t,” Wade said dazedly, frantically. “Don’t talk, Peter. Just. *Don’t*.”

Blood pounded in Peter's ears. He was mesmerized by the thick vein twining around Wade's cock. It pulsed visibly, tempting, beckoning.

"Peter. Peter..." Wade was chanting Peter's name, a continuous, fervent litany that could only just be deciphered. As if he wasn't even aware of it, Wade murmured, "Can't stop remembering how you looked, how you sounded when you came. It's been driving me crazy. You've been driving me crazy."

"Then..." Peter's hand was a blur on his dick. He was close, so close, but he had to take Wade over the edge with him. "Let me see you come, too. At least... if I can't t-touch you, let me *see*..."

Wade grunted. He buckled inwards, hunching over, and then he came—spine curving, cock shooting spurt after spurt of semen over his knuckles and across his quivering belly. Wade's features were contorted as if in agony, and he looked so lost, so lonely—so unbearably lonely, *no*—

Peter staggered to his feet and over to Wade, collapsing on top of him and kissing him wetly, messily. Peter came like that, surging against Wade, moaning into Wade's mouth, holding him and holding him and holding him.

"Not alone," Peter kept saying all through it, even through the blistering shockwaves drowning him, undoing him. "Wade, you're not alone. Wade..."

Minutes passed. They caught their breaths, foreheads pressed together, leaning into each other.

Wade was holding Peter right back.

He was carding his fingers through Peter's hair, lightly, soothingly, in a caress that was oddly protective. Wade tucked the loose curls behind Peter's ears; Peter was due for a haircut.

A quiet bliss filled Peter then; he couldn't have described it, but it had to do with how Wade cherished him, and how Wade had stated, out loud, that he loved Peter. The magnitude of that admission didn't rock Peter to the core, as he might have expected; rather, it pervaded Peter like a slow spill of honey, a subtle, molten glow that lit him from within.

"You're unbelievable," Wade mumbled. "Trust you to take what shouldn't have been so ridiculously intense and turn it into some kinda soul-wringing ordeal."

"Mm," said Peter sleepily. His soul was certainly wrung out.

"And as if that wasn't tiring enough, we're gonna have to walk to the mess hall stinking like a brothel."

"Shower's straight afterward." Peter yawned. A golden lassitude was blanketing him, and Wade was naked underneath him, all two-hundred-and-ten pounds of solid muscle and blazing skin. Relaxing in Wade's arms was more luxurious than relaxing in a jacuzzi. Not that Peter had ever relaxed in a jacuzzi. But he was convinced that this was a far superior experience.

"Yeah, *afterward*. We'll be lining up for mashed potatoes and turnip soup smelling like Eau de Jizz."

"Still nicer than what the food smells like." Peter nuzzled into Wade's shoulder, which did, indeed, smell pretty damn delicious. "Consider it a badge of honor."

“Weren’t you self-conscious before you became a seductive, man-eating siren?” Wade jostled Peter on his lap, but Peter’s eyelids were already drooping. “What happened to you?”

“A mind-blowing orgasm happened to me.” Peter yawned again. “Can we nap till lunchtime? And *don’t* put your clothes back on.”

“Yes, your highness,” Wade said dryly.

Peter was vaguely conscious of Wade lifting him, all deliberately leashed power and careful tenderness, and depositing him on the bed. He was drifting off as soon as Wade settled in beside him.

“Jeez,” grumbled Wade, as Peter instinctively curled around him. “You’re like a kitten.”

It wasn’t a very heartfelt complaint.

Chapter 14

That evening, Peter steeled himself and told Wade about Project Rebirth and about the allies that Peter had on the inside. That he potentially had on the inside. Explaining his friends' well-meaning misadventures to Wade went just as

Peter had foreseen—which was to say, Gwen and Ned had a new fan. A somewhat deranged new fan. If they were rock stars, Wade would probably be putting up posters of them on the cell walls. Heck, Wade would probably put up posters of them regardless. They'd achieved more than just rock star status with him. His eyes shone with hero worship.

"Those are some ride-or-die motherfuckers," Wade said admiringly. "You're lucky, Pete, having buddies like them."

"Buddies that're shortly gonna end up in jail with me." Peter crossed his arms and sulked. "And because I'm stuck in prison, I can't even help them. Not unless Grantham gets put on the list for Project Rebirth's launch, and I can hack any files our august institution has on the project." Peter shot Wade a warning look. "Not that I'll allow you to volunteer for it, even if it does get introduced here."

"Eh," said Wade. "Getting out and spending the rest of my life with you after *you* get out? That doesn't sound too bad."

"Don't. You. Dare." Peter grabbed Wade by the collar and glowered at him. "Don't ever get involved with anything remotely related to Norman Osborn. You'll live to regret it. Or you won't, because *you won't live*. Human experimentation aimed only at those who're on death row or those who have life sentences should tell you how high the stakes are. They're targeting inmates who reckon they have nothing to lose, but they do. You could lose your life, Wade. You could lose your limbs. Your organs. Just... don't mess with Osborn."

"Your friends are messing with Osborn."

"I wish they weren't, either! If—if only I could stop them—"

“Peter.” Wade was uncharacteristically somber. “You can’t stop them. What they do for you is their free will. You can’t influence it, and you can’t alter it. You have to accept that the people who love you don’t want you to stay in prison. And that includes me.”

Peter recoiled like he’d been slapped. He usually tried not to dwell on the fact that he was only in for eight years—partly because even eight years felt like forever, but partly because he couldn’t tolerate abandoning Wade to endure this hell on his own. Peter had hoped they wouldn’t have to discuss it, not for many years yet.

“I...” Peter recalled his chat with Gwen, and how incredulous she’d been when he’d said he wasn’t especially invested in leaving prison early. There was a horrible churning in his stomach, a horrible cracking in his chest. It was like he was splitting open from the inside out. “I don’t want to leave you, Wade.”

“But you will. You have to. You think I wanna be the reason you’re stuck in here? You gotta go back to college, Petey. Gwen was right. You have to graduate. Make groundbreaking discoveries. World-saving discoveries.”

“And you’ll just ask me to forget you, to stop visiting you, like you asked Vanessa?”

Wade winced. “Look, you’ll get tired of conjugal visits being the only action—the only *affection*—you get. At some point.”

“No. No, I won’t.”

“Pete.” Wade was so kind. His eyes had such compassion in them, such forgiveness. “It’s okay.”

"It's—" Peter's voice broke. "It's not okay. And... And I won't forget you. I swear. I won't just walk away. I won't stop visiting. I won't be able to. Every moment you're not with me is a moment I'll ache, and ache, and *ache*."

Wade briefly closed his eyes, as if he couldn't bear the faith, the unshakeable truth in Peter's declaration. "That doesn't mean you won't still have to get over me."

"I won't," Peter whispered certainly, despairingly. His heart echoed the words, deep as fate, deep as a cut that would never heal. "I won't."

"You will."

Peter began quaking, a wave of cold inevitability washing over him. He felt sick. Like he could throw up.

"Hey." Wade bopped Peter softly on the nose, and then hugged him. It was a crushingly tight hug, like Wade's body had to keep Peter near even if Wade's mind was telling it that it couldn't. "That doesn't mean you don't love me, Peter. Or that I don't love you. It's just the way it is."

"It doesn't have to be."

"Oh?" A trace of amusement returned to Wade's tone. "What're you going to do, break me out with your smarts?"

Peter squared his jaw. "I might."

Wade chuckled into Peter's collarbone. "Hm," he said affectionately, indulgently. "Maybe you will."

Peter closed his own eyes, too, because he wasn't sure he could see Wade in front of him and survive the thought of never seeing him again.

There were still directions in which this conversation could go, that it had to go. But not today. Peter couldn't take it today.

And maybe Wade sensed that, because he just rocked Peter in his arms, kissing Peter's brow, his temple, his eyelids, his mouth. Their kisses melted together, tentative as if they were both wounded, as if they were both afraid of the future but couldn't help needing each other in spite of it. It was as if they were touching beyond the skin, somewhere where they could not be parted, where the distance between their bodies could not, would not matter. Not ever.

It was sweet, sweet as the darkest wine, blood-warm and intoxicating. Peter let himself fall into it as if into the boundless comfort of the night, where it was too pitch-black to see the edges of things, the sharp edges upon which he might cut himself.

The three weeks Pedro had given Peter to hack into the prison computers had almost elapsed. With Dopinder as his accomplice, Peter had managed to rig Dopinder's pirated iPhone up to the internet, and to reroute the signal through the darknet until the IP was untraceable.

When Peter transported the iPhone to Pedro, it was strapped under his shirt by strips of cloth, because there were no pockets in maximum security prison uniforms and Peter was *not* going to carry a phone in his ass. That was—no. Just. No. Wade, however, found the prospect of a butt-phone hilarious. Of course he did. He even called it an “inbuilt vibrator” and offered to take it to Pedro himself.

Jackass.

They were back to normal, now—or as normal as they ever got—and Wade wasn't walking on eggshells around Peter anymore, as shamefaced as if he'd been responsible for raising the topic of their unavoidable separation.

Thankfully, that phase hadn't lasted, not with Peter's stubbornness chipping away at Wade's self-imposed torment. They'd reverted to their customary banter, with Wade still sidestepping Peter's attempts at getting him into bed.

Jackass.

The least they could do was to get fabulous sex out of the eight years they had together. It was only logical. Peter was determined to make as many memories with Wade as he could, while he could. They'd have to be enough to sustain him for a lifetime.

They wouldn't be. Only being with Wade would ever be enough. But Peter had to pretend otherwise, or he'd break, and Wade would break right along with him.

So Peter plastered his game face on and marched to the library, escorted by one of Pedro's men. Wade had argued that he should accompany Peter, but Peter had reassured Wade that he was safe enough with Pedro's guard, and besides, Peter wouldn't gain any credibility if Wade was always hovering around him like an overprotective nanny.

"They underestimate me," Peter had said to Wade. "I have to change that."

And Wade had relented. Not happily, but he had, because he respected Peter's choices—just as Wade had advised Peter to respect Gwen's and Ned's choices.

It was weird, how much Wade was teaching Peter about respect and how crucial it was, especially since Wade was a convicted serial killer with a collection of specialist knives that he still got all misty-eyed about. He reminisced about those knives like most guys reminisced about ex-girlfriends.

When Peter got to the library, he knocked on the open door. The tableau was just as it was before—Pedro seated at the main desk, surrounded by bodyguards stationed all over the library, noses buried in books they clearly weren't reading. What a waste it was; even Peter would contemplate becoming a goon if it got him these many hours around books. Pedro would be grateful for the companionship.

The concept of a prison book club flashed through Peter's mind, incongruous but worth exploring. Pedro and Peter couldn't be the only nerds at Grantham.

Pedro looked up, his gray eyes light against his tawny complexion. God, those eyes were petrifying. For Peter, it was like having razors leveled at him; he twitched fearfully before he could prevent it. Having the appropriate body language around a fellow as observant as Pedro was imperative, but Peter had just failed that most basic of tests, and as expected, Pedro's keen gaze had taken it all in.

"Mr. Parker," he greeted Peter, calm as ever. "I hope you have good news for me."

That... that was absolutely a threat. Peter fought the urge to twitch again. "I do," he said instead, confidently, and strode in past the bodyguards as if they didn't exist. He claimed the chair opposite Pedro's and lifted his shirt to

expose his torso. "I have the phone for you, right here. May I remove it?"

"That ain't all he can remove," muttered a guard behind Peter, appreciatively, and Peter flushed.

He didn't lower his shirt, though. He wasn't going to give in to sexual harassment.

Pedro made a moue of distaste—not at Peter, but at his guard. "Don't be juvenile, Miguel," he said in annoyance. He was, evidently, completely unaffected by Peter's semi-nudity, and in that instant, Peter felt a rush of peculiar gratitude toward him. "Yes, you may remove what you have strapped to yourself, Mr. Parker. If it's a wiretap or a concealed weapon, you're dead. But you know that."

"I do." Wow. Death. Nice, bringing that up at the very beginning. But Peter was formed of hardier stuff than he had been when he'd been arrested; mentions of death didn't phase him. He confronted death everyday. "I wouldn't risk my neck hacking into the system only to get murdered in the library." Peter caught a glimpse of a large tome on Pedro's desk, just underneath the library catalog; the title on the spine read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, an ironic selection for a prison inmate. "Wouldn't want to get any bloodstains on the books."

"I do treasure my books," Pedro deadpanned. But there was a hint of pleasure in his statement, the same pleasure he'd shown when he'd last interacted with Peter.

Peter unwrapped the strips of fabric holding the phone in place, and it fell onto his palm. He swiped on the lock-screen and entered the password, going to the custom-made VOIP application he'd programmed for the device and launching it. "I've, er. I've invented this app to help

route the calls. I've trialed it on numbers I know—like my college and the Pizza Hut adjoining my home—and on numbers Dopinder knows. None of our numbers showed up in the prison records, which means I succeeded. Whatever video or audio calls you key in through this app will go undetected. They'll all be encrypted; there are encryptions on this phone that rival those of most cryptocurrencies."

"Spare me the marketing spiel and give me the phone." Pedro held out his hand, and Peter dropped the iPhone into it, hoping Pedro wasn't grossed out by how tepid the phone's surface was from its recent contact with Peter's flesh. "If you're lying," Pedro forewarned, "and if I later learn that my calls were indeed detected or reported to the police, then you're also dead."

"Yeah," Peter said wryly. "I got that the first time."

Surprisingly, Pedro grinned. And immediately dialed a number. It must be a number he'd memorized. A critical number.

Peter fidgeted, abruptly terrified that the call wouldn't go through.

But it did.

"Pedro?" said an elderly woman, and the screen, which Pedro hadn't entirely angled away from Peter, showed an aging Latina clad in a pastel-pink cardigan and ivory-white pearls. In the background was a delicate, enameled dining table with a heap of knitted tea cozies on it, and in the woman's wizened, wrinkled old hands was a pair of knitting needles. "So the baby chick you wrote to me about has hatched, has he?"

Pedro smirked at Peter, and Peter mouthed, *Am I the baby chick?*

Pedro coughed as if to cover a laugh, and said into the phone, "Abuela. How are you?"

"As well as I can be given that my diamonds have yet to cross the border."

Her *what?* Peter's eyeballs bugged out.

"I've lost four fools to the Irish," she continued.

Pedro tsked regretfully. "Lost as in, the Irish killed them, or lost as in, you killed them for betraying us?"

"A bit of both," Pedro's apparently homicidal grandma admitted, as Peter's jaw all but dislocated itself in amazement.

"You're scandalizing the chick," Pedro said fondly. "We shouldn't converse any further on particulars, just in case his assertion of encryption is false advertising. Anyhow, it isn't like the FBI haven't already been tracking the diamonds; I assume you've enacted the necessary evasive maneuvers?"

"Was that a Star Trek reference?" Peter squeaked, but Pedro ignored him.

"You don't have to remind me," the evil grandma from hell drawled, in a deadpan identical to her grandson's. Genetics ran strong in Pedro's family, it seemed. "I'm not the child here, Pedro. You are."

And she hung up.

Pedro regarded the phone with satisfaction, and handed it back to Peter. "I can't keep the phone lest it be found on my person; I'd rather it was found on yours."

"So I take the blame for having it?"

"The blame, and the attendant prison sentence extension."

But Peter was still struggling to comprehend what he'd seen. "Does... Does your grandmother stab traitors in the eyes with those knitting needles, or what?"

"Or what," Pedro concurred, to Peter's profound horror. "Those knitting needles are more feared in our group than any other method of execution."

"I... I'm going to pass out."

"Please don't," Pedro admonished him. "I have no intention of carrying you back to your cell, Cinderella-style."

"Couldn't you just hand me off to your guards?"

"And entrust them with your virtue? While you're unconscious? Don't be absurd."

"Thank you for preserving my chastity, I guess." Wait, why would Pedro even do that? Was there some code of honor in this situation that Peter was unaware of?

"Considering that you're shacking up with Deadpool, your chastity must be extinct."

If only it were; Peter couldn't confide his woes about his sexual frustration to Pedro. Nor could he reveal that Wade wasn't plowing Peter's ass on the regular—forget plowing, they hadn't even had hands-on sex.

Taking Peter's reticence as assent, Pedro said, "I presume, based on your previous audience with me, that you intend to share this prized resource with various groups and individuals. Again, I would counsel you against doing so."

"Sorry, but my original intention stands. I will help any inmates who need to communicate with their families. Like you just communicated with your grandma."

"It was only a social call, as we cannot review specific strategies over the phone." Wistfulness added a humanness to Pedro's cool demeanor; after all, he was forbidden visits altogether as a disciplinary measure for violating prison laws repeatedly. "But at least I can hear her, see her."

Jesus. Peter's innards squeezed in sympathy, because he knew that feeling. He missed Aunt May, too. But how could anybody miss that... that... gorgon of a woman that Pedro had just spoken to? She killed people *with knitting needles*. Even Wade wasn't that unhinged. Was he?

"Er, speaking of dissuading," Peter digressed, because critiquing Pedro's grandmother would guarantee his being slaughtered on the spot. "I have to dissuade you from, uh. An opportunity that might be headed toward you that you definitely should not avail yourself of."

"Oh?" Pedro leaned back, a wolfish hook curling his thin upper lip. "You're adapting to the jargon of the criminal world admirably. Do go on."

"I can't just... say it... with witnesses around us. It's highly classified." Peter gestured uncomfortably at the guards. "Could you send them away? I have to speak to you alone."

Pedro's bodyguards exchanged suggestive leers, likely inferring that Peter would offer to suck Pedro's cock, or

perform similar sex acts. Again, Pedro quashed their licentious sniggering with a glare. He obviously didn't have any patience for coarseness. To Peter, he said, "You do realize you're asking me to expel my bodyguards from a room in which you are the only occupant aside from myself."

"Um, yes?" Peter blinked. Then, belatedly recognizing that Pedro wasn't implying what his minions were, Peter hurried to clarify, "I won't assassinate you, I promise."

Pedro snorted. "You couldn't, even if you planned to. I would overpower you easily. It is merely a flouting of tradition to banish one's guards in the presence of a stranger not in the group. It suggests that I have more confidence in that stranger than I do in my group. Which sets a poor precedent."

"And you're all about precedents, aren't you?" Maybe that explained Pedro's worshipful attitude toward his grandma; she outranked Pedro in age and wisdom, and because of that, he would never disobey her. To be quite frank, his misplaced adoration for her gave Peter the heebie-jeebies. Peter would be compulsively psychoanalyzing it for the rest of the day.

Pedro himself was studying Peter as he would a puzzle, doing some psychoanalyzing of his own. Then, ostensibly resolving to take a gamble, Pedro waved at his thugs imperiously. "You heard the man. Leave."

And they did. Peter could discern, from their lingering leers and lack of resistance, that they really were envisioning Pedro nailing Peter on that library desk—that they were cheering their boss on, even. What deluded, one-track minds those losers had.

They'd better be deluded, or else Peter would soon be thoroughly deflowered by Pedro. Asking for them to leave might've been a grave miscalculation.

As the bodyguards filed out and shut the door behind them, Peter fiddled with his phone, increasingly anxious. Did he have to do this?

Yeah. Yeah, he did. He still had a conscience, and he wouldn't let his incarceration destroy it.

Pedro quirked an interrogative eyebrow. "Talk."

Peter set his shoulders and lifted his chin. Cowering wouldn't make him any more persuasive. "This is about Oscorp. Ever heard of it?"

Pedro, all-knowing sonovabitch that he was, just rattled off all the facts about Oscorp that could conceivably be rattled off by someone who wasn't *in* Oscorp. "A biotech and pharmaceutical giant, consistently ranked in the top ten of the Fortune 500. Allegedly involved in price fixing, bank fraud, and illegal medical research, with class-action lawsuits having been brought against it—unsuccessfully—in 1996, 2001, 2009 and 2012. And, furthermore, the company whose CEO put you in prison."

Peter gawked at him.

Pedro tilted his head. "Am I correct?"

"How... How do you know that Norman Osborn framed me?"

"I don't objectively know that he framed you, although I have deduced that he did, given your unfamiliarity with

felonious undertakings and your extremely inconvenient scruples.”

Peter huffed. “I like my scruples.”

“Most innocents do.” Pedro said it pityingly, like innocence was an unfortunate character flaw. “As for *why* I know... I like to be informed about my potential enemies—and my potential allies.”

“Which am I?”

“A bit of both,” Pedro echoed his grandmother, and smiled. It was a chilling smile, utterly devoid of emotion.

Peter shivered. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should.”

“Uh, so about Oscorp... This isn’t out in the public yet, but it will be in the next couple of weeks. They’re—Norman Osborn’s collaborating with the government on human experimentation. Their goal is to figure out how to create super-soldiers. Soldiers that don’t, um. Die.”

Pedro’s eyebrow, thus far only slightly raised, climbed to new heights. It was practically at his hairline. “Have you been reading too many comic books, Mr. Parker? Or do you honestly believe I’m that gullible?”

“You’re about as gullible as Havelock Vetinari,” Peter said, and wasn’t even shocked when Pedro got his literary allusion.

“I’ll take *that* as a compliment.”

“You’re welcome.”

"If Oscorp is venturing into science fiction territory, why should I be interested?"

"Oh, c'mon. You're interested in everything. You're just that kinda dude."

Pedro appeared mildly astonished. "You display an unusual degree of understanding as regards to my internal workings."

"You're not as unfathomable as you think you are."

"To most people, I am." Pedro was studying Peter again, a little too closely for Peter's comfort.

Peter shifted uneasily. "Not to me. And you'll be plenty interested when Oscorp brings Project Rebirth—that's what it's called—into prisons across the nation. Including, possibly, this prison. They'll be inviting 'volunteers' from among prisoners who have life sentences or who are on death row. Volunteers that the experimentation process will, in all likelihood, maim, dismember or kill." Bile rose in Peter's throat; he was repulsed by science being misused in this manner. "But even knowing that, there're prisoners who will sign up on the off-chance that it'll win them their freedom."

Pedro hummed thoughtfully. "That's the reward for volunteering, isn't it? Freedom?"

"Yep. Tempting, huh? Except that it's a terrible idea. Don't do it. And don't let your guys do it. You have power over a whopping third of the prison population at Grantham. If you ban your flunkies from participating in Project Rebirth, they'll be saved from more agony than you can imagine. Trust me."

Pedro didn't demand, *Why should I trust you?* Which had to be progress. Pedro only studied Peter with renewed intensity.

It was like being a bug under a magnifying glass. Peter squirmed. "Well, you won't get the chance to volunteer, anyway, since you're not in for life."

"No," Pedro said serenely. "Only fifteen years. A pittance compared to the sentences of murderers like Deadpool."

"Right. Like you've never murdered anyone."

Pedro's eyes went all wide and guileless. "Why, I'd never."

Why did Peter sort of want to giggle? This wasn't funny. Murder wasn't funny. "Nah, you just don't like getting your hands dirty by murdering your victims yourself. You must order murders like most folks order cappuccinos at Starbucks."

"As I said." Pedro's features took on a distinctly reptilian cast, part-pleased and part-speculative. "You are uncommonly perceptive about my inner workings."

"When you're not in jail, you wear suits 24/7, don't you? I bet you even wear suits to *breakfast*. No wonder you don't wanna get, like, guts and gore all over your Armanis."

"Zegnas." Something resembling genuine amusement was pulling at Pedro's mouth. "I prefer Zegnas."

"Goddamn Italians," Peter griped under his breath.

"Half-Italian, technically." Pedro drummed his fingers idly on the edge of his desk. "Why are you telling me this? If it's true, then this is expensive information."

“Expensive...?” Peter frowned in confusion. “But I’m not charging you for it.”

Pedro didn’t roll his eyes, not physically, but Peter got the impression that he was doing it mentally. “You should be. Information has value, Mr. Parker. Therefore, information has a price. What is your price? Name it, and you shall have it.”

“What type of depraved asshole would I be to earn money off of this?” Peter snapped, before remembering who he was addressing and tempering his moral indignation. “This is human experimentation we’re talking about, not a—a business enterprise!”

Pedro was unmoved. “To Norman Osborn, it *is* a business enterprise.”

“That’s because he’s a psychopath.”

“And I’m not?”

“No,” said Peter, with an assurance that came outta nowhere, blindsiding him. “You’re not.”

Pedro went *still*, all of a sudden, like a snake in the underbrush, poised to strike. He murmured, hushed and dangerous, “Most of my associates would disagree with your assessment.”

“That’s because you play the role very, very well. Hell, you almost had me convinced. But you don’t have your grandma convinced, do you?”

The snake uncoiled. Slowly. Peter could see it in the barely-visible tension bleeding away from Pedro’s shoulders, like a cloak that Pedro was methodically, deliberately shedding.

“That is an exceedingly rare opinion,” Pedro remarked, unruffled once again. “As in, only you and my grandmother share it. More importantly, why are you still abreast of developments within a company from which you were fired and by which you were framed? You couldn’t have informants on the inside, could you?”

Peter did his best not to go all shifty-eyed. He was scarcely an average liar, even after all of Wade’s lessons on bluffing. “No. I mean, of course I don’t.”

“My, my, Mr. Parker,” Pedro said approvingly. “How devious of you.”

Great. So Pedro had ferreted it out in 0.0001 seconds flat. Which he would, wouldn’t he? “I ask that you, um, commit to the anonymity of my sources and don’t try to discover their identities. Because if you do, I—and, by extension, you—will lose the intelligence they can funnel to me. Us.”

“Is there an ‘us,’ Mr. Parker?”

“When it comes to being human, yeah. There is an us. You’re human, as are your toadies, as are all the inmates in this facility. And I’m gonna go to every leader in this godforsaken jail and pester them till they decide that they can’t permit their guys to join Project Rebirth.”

“Because they’re human, too, and you can’t abide their suffering?” Pedro didn’t say it patronizingly. He was solemn, even... envious? No, that required more sentiment than Pedro was capable of. But there was *some* feeling stirring in the depths of the frosty lake that was Pedro’s imperturbable mien, even though Peter couldn’t pinpoint what that feeling was.

Still, it was a relief to have Pedro just outright state what Peter had, incoherently, been trying to articulate. “Exactly.”

“So you’re helping me—and the gentlemen in my employ—solely out of the goodness of your heart?”

Peter beamed. “Seems like it.”

“You are deplorably idealistic.”

“Doesn’t match with the fugly orange jumpsuit, does it?” Peter jogged his knee impatiently. “So, whaddaya say? When the news about Project Rebirth becomes public and you can confirm my account, what’ll your stance be? Will you authorize your lackeys to sign up for it?”

Pedro didn’t answer. He got up from his chair and strolled to the library window. It was among the few accessible windows in the prison, although its view of the compound was marred by sturdy iron bars. After a lull in which he peered meditatively out onto the grounds, Pedro said, “You’re a joker.”

“Gee, thanks, I knew you didn’t take me seriously, but—”

“I meant, a Joker with a capital J. A wildcard. No, worse than a wildcard. We’re busy playing an intricate card game in here, all poker faces and counter-bluffs, and in you wander to sweep our cards off the table.”

“And that’s... bad?”

Pedro turned to look at Peter again. “You tell me, Mr. Parker. You’re not just taking control away from some of the worst control freaks in the country; you’re challenging the notion of there being such a thing as control, at all.”

“Isn’t that good? Liberating them from their delusions?”

“Sometimes, our delusions are all we have. And in a place like this? They help us survive. You may glorify yourself as a liberator, boy, but most of us don’t want to be liberated.”

Peter met Pedro’s eyes unflinchingly. “Do you?”

Pedro stared at him. He was wearing a strange expression, an expression that, for the only time in their short acquaintance, seemed wholly unguarded. “I don’t know,” he said finally, quietly.

Peter sat there, stunned. Did Pedro just admit to *not knowing* something? Was the sky falling down? Peter glanced out of the window to check.

“You should depart, Mr. Parker, before my men start spreading rumors that I’ve impregnated you.”

“That you’ve what?” Peter spluttered. “That isn’t even... That isn’t even biologically possible!”

“I suspect it is prison slang for—”

“Nope!” Peter leapt up from his seat, clapping his hands over his ears. “Not hearin’ it!”

Pedro laughed, a low rumble of sound that followed Peter on his way out.

Chapter 15

Peter woke up to the bunk bed creaking as Wade tossed restlessly below him.

Wade was mumbling to himself, like he often did in his sleep. His unopened eyes darted around at unseen horrors, and it wasn't until Peter lowered himself from the upper bunk and gently jostled Wade that Wade snapped awake. A sickly pallor had overcome him, but Peter simply hugged it out of Wade, like he'd taken to doing.

"What were you dreaming about?" Peter asked lightly; if he got too doom-and-gloom about it, Wade tended to just shrug it off without sharing. "Was it about the goblins with the cactus shaped like a dildo? Or was it about the bank vault that turned out to be a giant mouth that swallowed your penis?"

"Bruh," said Wade feelingly, patting himself down like he'd been attacked during the night. "Don't remind me. That vault swallowed my penis *and didn't give it back*. I was traumatized as fuck. Kept cupping my crotch every five seconds for the next month. Not that I don't always cup my crotch; it's comforting, like I imagine cupping my own boobs would be. If I had boobs."

Peter sighed. "Is this going to be an 'I'm convinced there's an alternate universe with a female version of me' conversation? Because you're not mistaken; as per quantum physics, there could be a female version of you."

"See!" Wade crowed victoriously. "The science backs me up!" Wade shielded his privates with his hands. "But still,

that vault? Had me cupping my crotch a *lot*. My masculinity isn't usually so fragile."

"And what you just dreamed of was even more traumatizing?"

"Eh." Wade flopped his hand in a so-so gesture. "Sorta? I was having a fun sex dream about murder—you know, the kind where you're killing an arch-villain and your dick's so stiff it could hammer through steel?"

"No, I don't know," Peter said patiently, no longer horrified by the content of Wade's dreams. It wasn't like Wade was actively murdering people at present, so his murder dreams were relatively harmless. Besides, Wade's brain had always been peculiar. Expecting it to manufacture normal dreams—like being late for class or showing up naked to a birthday party—just wasn't sensible. Well, maybe the showing-up-naked part. But not the other parts.

"At least my dick isn't stiff anymore." Wade blinked down at his crotch in vague surprise. "It must've gone limp when the asshole I was killing changed into... some... furry critter? And I am *not* into that, I mean, I'm into pretty much most kinks, and I don't judge the furies, but I'm just not into that. And I was so close to blowing my load, too; I even had a machete in the guy's stomach. What a waste of a good blood-letting."

"Uh-huh," said Peter, doing his best not to be too perturbed. Or to lose his nonexistent lunch. He had to be supportive; these were all symptoms of Wade's unremitting, albeit often concealed, mental instability. Isolating Wade would be both pointless and cruel; it'd just leave him alone in his own head, with all the nightmares that his psyche was trying to persuade him *weren't* nightmares. Like these

sex dreams about murder. “Is that why you’re so shell-shocked?”

“Don’t get those dreams much, recently,” Wade rambled on, as if mostly to himself. “They always fucked me up, because I was horny during them but wanted to puke after them. With you here, though? They fuck me up even more.” Wade wretched suddenly, but since yesterday’s dinner hadn’t been more than a molecule of organic goop on a plate, no actual bile was produced. “The guilt’s, like, a gazillion times guiltier. I feel like the Beast waking up next to Belle. Totally undeserving.”

Peter smiled feebly. “The Beast or Belle?”

“Don’t front. It’s the Beast that’s undeserving. I’m a turd, but I’m a self-aware turd.” Wade hugged Peter back. Briefly. “Now leggo of me, I’m gross—not just spiritually gross, but physically gross. I’m all drenched in panic sweat. Which is yucky, not sexy.”

“So what if it isn’t sexy?” Peter wasn’t whining. Of course he wasn’t. He just had a hunch that Wade required more hugs on post-nightmare days, and... okay, so did Peter. Peter craved hugs constantly, regardless of what day it was. “Am I supposed to not hug you until after the shower, which is after lunch, which is after breakfast?”

“Whoa. Put like that, it *is* ages away. But Peter, I stink like rotten cheese. You don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do,” Peter insisted. “And you don’t stink, don’t be melodramatic. It’s only a faint odor.”

“I notice your use of the word ‘faint.’ My stench must make you wanna faint. Right?”

"Oh, give it up." Peter squeezed Wade against him vengefully, and then asked his customary question on mornings like these. It aided Peter in assessing Wade's condition, because Wade's answers to this question were invariably revealing. "How's the brain?"

"Iffy. Dotty. Screaming internally. Like that Muppet-on-a-train gif or that Van Gogh painting."

It was Peter's turn to blink. "What Van Gogh painting?"

"The one that looks like scrambled eggs made of piss and vomit and blood, with a screaming man drowning in the center of them." Wade imitated a whooshing noise. "It's like the dude's being flushed down a toilet full of very bloody diarrhea."

"That's..." *A dreadfully accurate description, to the point where, were I an Art History professor, I'd be equally tempted to applaud you for your accuracy and fail you for it.* "That's not by Van Gogh. It's by a Norwegian painter named Edvard Munch."

Wade extricated himself from Peter's hug and stood up, wobbling until he grabbed the bed to balance himself. "Bet Pedro knows it's by Munch," he grumbled.

"Er, yes? He does? Or I think he does." Peter scratched his nose. "What's that got to do with it?"

"He's a turd, too." Wade wagged a finger at Peter forbiddingly. "Remember that. A turd dipped in gold and sparkly, shiny glitter, but still 100% pure, distilled turd."

"When did we go from paintings to turds?"

"Augh." Wade wretched again. "Scat. Yet another kink I'm not into. What is *up* with the brain today?"

"It's, um, reenacting Edvard Munch's greatest composition?" Peter offered.

"That must be it," Wade mumbled, like he hadn't just offered the same explanation himself. "Fuck Munch. Except he's too evil to deserve the joy of a fucking. *Unfuck* him. Crap, I need a shower."

"Like I said, you'll only get it after lunch."

Wade swore. "Unfuck this whole place."

"Including me?" Peter raised an eyebrow, leaning back on the bunk seductively. It was meant to be in jest, but Wade's eyes caught and held on the spread of Peter's thighs, caught and held and *held*, and Peter's mouth went dry. He recalled showing off for Wade on this bunk, touching himself for Wade, and blushed.

"Uh," said Wade, clearly envisioning of the opposite of the term 'unfuck.' Still wobbly as a colt, he tilted himself away from Peter and toward the latrine. "I'm. I'mma piss?"

"Never knew you were into golden showers, either," Peter said jokingly, to distract himself from how sexually charged the atmosphere was.

"Ain't my fault." Wade retreated behind the metal partition that cordoned off the latrine, sticking up a middle finger over its frame. "Talk to the brain."

Smokes' cell was in B Block, and it took twenty minutes of medium-speed trekking to get there, with Pedro's thug of the day shadowing Wade and Peter closely.

Peter was antsy about meeting Smokes, because he didn't want it to seem like he and Wade were bullying the elderly man to extract some form of payment from him for saving his life. Preying on the weak in that fashion was unacceptable. There were protection rackets in prison just as there were outside of prison, and Peter really wasn't comfortable with even the appearance of selling protection against the Nazis.

That protection came for free.

Pedro hadn't been happy about that, but it wasn't like Peter could ensure that Wade wouldn't just go ballistic and reduce any fascist pig he encountered into a sticky, bloody smear. Wade wasn't Peter's obedient pooch; Peter's influence over Wade wasn't absolute. And it shouldn't be. Theirs wouldn't be much of a consensual relationship if it were.

To be honest, when it came to the Nazis, Peter wouldn't stop Wade even if he could. He'd stop Wade from committing outright homicide, or from causing injuries that would land him in solitary, but Peter couldn't pretend that he'd dissuade Wade from smacking some sense into a white supremacist. Especially if it'd save an innocent person's life.

Peter's position on violence had obviously evolved. Somewhat.

And he wasn't looking forward to having that conversation with Pedro. Eventually, he'd have to, but Peter was just gambling on not being compelled to have that discussion until Pedro was more reliant on Peter's talents and had more respect for Peter overall.

Otherwise, Peter would wind up dead in the library, with Pedro's precious copy of Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece sadly disfigured by Peter's innards. If Pedro's grandma killed folks with knitting needles, what did Pedro kill them with? Bookmarks?

Nah. Pedro just got his goons and his allies to do the murdering for him. He'd said as much. If outsourcing was attractive to businesses, it was only natural that it would be attractive to the mafia, which was a type of business.

Shit. Peter was beginning to think like a criminal. Just how long could he live in the swamp before transforming into a swamp creature? Peter was becoming the ethical equivalent of Shrek.

Wait, did that make Wade Fiona? Wade was more like Donkey. No offense to Wade. Or Donkey.

With Pedro's minion stalking them *just* out of hearing distance, Wade and Peter could converse in relative peace.

"What do you reckon Pedro's up to?" Wade said for about the millionth time. He was anxious about Pedro's motivations, which was understandable, given that seven men had been executed under Pedro's orders in the past year. "Will he back you?"

"He should?" Peter grimaced. "It's like he's training me to be a prison boss. He volunteered to pay me for my

information on Project Rebirth, even though I hadn't asked to be paid. He was teaching me how it's done."

Wade chewed on his thumb. "So he's taking you under his wing."

"Yeah, a falcon's wing. If it struck his fancy, he could capture me in his wickedly curved talons and pluck my head off with his beak." When Wade scowled, Peter hastened to add: "But I need to get him on board with resisting Project Rebirth. Only then will the other leaders take me seriously. If Pedro Corleone, strategic genius, draws the conclusion that there's something wrong with it, there must definitely be something very, very wrong with it. Possibly even more wrong than they can comprehend."

Before Wade could do more than scowl some more, they were at Smokes' cell. They'd attempted visiting Smokes in the infirmary while he was recovering, but had been banned on account of Smokes' condition being unstable. This was Smokes' first day back in his cell after his condition had improved sufficiently for him to be released back into the population. So Peter and Wade were visiting Smokes in his cell, and if anyone entertained the delusion that it was a form of extortion, then Wade would just have to set them right. By force, if need be.

There were only three hours before the cells would be locked up again for the night. That didn't give them much time. Peter hovered at the entrance to Smokes' cell and coughed.

"Er, hullo?" Peter rapped on the doorjamb. "Anybody home?"

"Yes, we're in." A tall, lanky young man in a pair of taped-up spectacles appeared in the doorway. Those spectacles

must've been punched off his face, because his left cheekbone was bruised, the bruise barely visible beneath his dark skin but still very much there. It couldn't have been Smokes who did that. "You're the guys who saved Smokes, aren't you? C'mon in. He's passed out, because they gave him a dose of painkillers before discharging him from the infirmary, but you can pop in and see how he is."

Peter edged cautiously into the cell with Wade accompanying him. There Smokes was, lying unconscious on the lower bunk, his head bandaged up and with ghastly, purplish, half-healed stitches all over him. His eyelids were blue-veined and wrinkled, and there was such an exhausted fragility to him that Peter twinged to see it. It was similar to Aunt May's increasing fragility as age overtook her—a sort of transparency, as if she were in the process of fading away.

"Fuck." Wade hissed at the sight of Smokes' stitches. "He still resembles mincemeat. Should he even be out here? He doesn't look like he should be out of the infirmary."

"They had to vacate his bed to take in an inmate with a stabbing," said Smokes' cellmate. "Smokes wasn't an emergency patient after the worst of his head-wounds healed, so he got booted out. You know how few beds there are in the infirmary. For a maximum security facility, Grantham doesn't get much funding, does it?" He extended his hand to Peter for a handshake, and then to Wade. "I'm Mike. Mike Baines."

"Hey, Mike," Wade greeted him brightly. "What're you in for?"

"Don't answer him," Peter said urgently, just in case Mike was in for a crime Wade had an aversion to. A crime Wade

might punish him for.

But Mike just sat down beside Smokes, gingerly, so as to not disturb him. Mike's carefulness with Smokes immediately told Peter that Mike was a decent man.

"I'm not in for any crime. I was framed. Same as you, probably," Mike said to Peter. "Aren't you just about my age?"

"I'm nineteen."

"Younger than me, then. I'm twenty." Mike laid a hand atop Smokes'. "A year ago, I was working on my architecture degree. Had a scholarship, a girlfriend, and a mom who was so proud of me she even bragged about me to random passengers on her daily commute."

Peter mourned for Mike's loss. He knew this story, even though it wasn't his, even though he'd never heard it. He *knew* where it was going, because it ended here, in prison. "Mike..."

"And then somebody called the cops on me while I was studying in Central Park."

"Just for studying?"

Mike quirked a rueful smile. "Just for studying. I tried to explain to them that I was just sitting there with my boring-as-hell textbooks, but they wouldn't listen. I *must* be up to some sneaky misdemeanor, right? Given the color of my skin? So they wrestled me to the ground and kicked me. Over and over."

Wade's fists curled reflexively, as if he could go back in time and stop what had happened to Mike. Peter steadied

Wade with a hand on his arm.

If Mike saw their interchange, he didn't let on. "Basically, I got my ass beat because I was black. And I got thrown in jail because they didn't expect me to beat *back*." Mike pushed his glasses up slightly. "Specifically, the cops didn't expect me to beat back."

"B-But..." Peter floundered. "But that's self-defense, isn't it? Self-defense against police brutality?"

"Would any jury buy that?" Mike's laugh was harsh, but it petered off when he looked down at Smokes. His eyes softened. "Guy's old as hell. He doesn't deserve what gets dealt to him on a daily basis. Just like I didn't deserve what got dealt to me by the cops. But I can't do shit about Smokes' situation, because my boss hasn't authorized me to. Maybe he will, though. He authorizes corrections all the time."

"C-corrections?" Peter asked. "And who's your boss?"

"He's *the* boss. The only other boss as powerful as Corleone."

"The Reverend." It wasn't that difficult for Peter to infer, considering the massive congregation that gathered around the priest at mealtimes and in the exercise yard. But the Reverend was a religious extremist, and Mike didn't seem like extremist material. "That's the Reverend, isn't it?"

"You got it. And when he orders corrections... It's when an inmate does something sinful. The Reverend corrects them."

"With violence," Wade added. "Now that's my *jam*."

Peter frowned at him, and then at Mike. "Who decides what's a sin?"

"God does."

"Mike," said Peter in exasperation, "religious fundamentalism is a sucky system anywhere in the world, but in a tinderbox like prison? It's gotta be even more volatile. Like, infinitely more volatile."

"We're volatile? You guys bashed a Nazi in the head so badly he nearly died. Didn't you make a moral judgment when you did that?"

"Okay, firstly?" Peter had to clarify this. "I didn't do any hitting. Wade was the, uh, hitter. And secondly, yes, there was a moral judgment, but it wasn't religiously motivated."

"So what if it is?" Mike balled his hands stubbornly, glowering down at them. "Because of the Reverend, the man who sexually assaulted me was permanently hospitalized and sent out of prison. The Reverend's why the latest pedophile to be incarcerated in Grantham was dead within a week. The Reverend's why the last man who said he'd rape one of us had his tongue cut out."

Wade was nodding along, an unholy light in his eyes. The they-got-what-they-deserved light. Peter hated it.

"So, what, the Reverend calls the shots? I thought it was God."

"The Reverend only educates us about God's will," Mike said with palpable doubt, as if parroting a spiel he didn't entirely subscribe to. "All we do is obey the edicts of the Bible."

"Including the edicts against homosexuality, worshipping other gods, eating shrimp and wearing mixed fabrics?" Peter leaned forward. "Does the Reverend encourage attacks on, say, Muslims? Or men in same-sex relationships?"

"No. The Reverend says that our Muslim brothers are also worshipers of the true and rightful God, but they are merely confused about which path to take to God. We aren't allowed to kill them, but we are supposed to convert them." Mike's eyes flitted timidly between Peter and Wade. "H-he says the same of homosexuals. They're just confused."

"Wonderful," Peter muttered. "So generous. And what if they don't convert?"

"The Reverend says they will," Mike said uneasily. "Because God will show them the truth."

"All right, even I'm getting freaked out by this," said Wade. "I'm all for pummeling the shit outta pedophiles and rapists, but all this cultish, holier-than-thou bullshit is giving me the hives. Sorry."

Mike hunched over, uncertainty writ plain on his features. "The Reverend's a bit too religious for me, I admit, but beggars can't be choosers. And I do owe him. If he hadn't sheltered me, I'd be a professional prison bitch by now."

Peter opened his mouth to protest, but Mike retorted angrily before Peter could even speak.

"Look, I had to ally myself with *some* group. Not all of us can secure undefeatable sugar daddies."

Peter flinched.

"Sorry," Mike apologized. "I... Sorry. You didn't deserve that. Nobody does."

"I'm luckier than many." Peter glanced sideways at Wade, who'd gone as still as a pillar. "I know that. And I'm thankful for that. But I'm... I'm still so, so sorry for all that's happened to you. *You* didn't deserve any of that."

Mike's visage twisted and untwisted, like he was in pain. He bowed protectively over Smokes, and Peter realized how important Smokes must be to Mike, how crucial Smokes' calming presence must be to Mike's emotional health. "It's not for you to be sorry about. You didn't send me to prison."

"No," said Peter. "No, but..." He reached under his shirt and wiggled the phone out of its cloth binding. He'd loosened the cloth marginally, so he wouldn't have to strip his shirt off to extract the phone. It wasn't the smartest idea to strip in this joint. "You can, er. Would you like to... talk? To your family?"

"What for?" Mike ran his fingers over his face, unfamiliarly, as if it were a stranger's. "No. I... I should stay out of their lives. My mom needs to forget she has a son. My girlfriend's better off with someone else. And my degree—who the fuck cares about my degree? It's not like my scholarship will be waiting for me when I'm released as a middle-aged man. The cops stole my life, Peter, and a chat over the phone isn't going to give it back."

It hit Peter harder than he was prepared for. He gazed down at the phone, lost, hurting because Mike was hurting and Peter couldn't *do* anything about it. Mike was just struggling to survive in the shark-tank, same as Peter was.

Except that, unlike Peter, Mike didn't have his very own shark to watch out for him. Or two sharks, counting Pedro.

Was the Reverend a shark, too? He claimed to be a man of faith, but could a man of faith achieve and maintain sovereignty within the prison like the Reverend had? Was religion just a sham for him, a sham to recruit and retain supporters? Or did he actually believe that tripe about gays and Muslims?

Peter wasn't sure which was more morally reprehensible.

But did it even matter? In practical terms, what the Reverend was doing had *some* merit if it gave sanctuary to unsheltered inmates like Mike. It didn't have the qualities of a protection racket. Mike wasn't forking over money, or any tangible substance.

All Mike was forking out was his loyalty.

Shit.

It *was* a racket, wasn't it? Be in the club, or find your own means of living outside of it?

Still, it was preferable to what Pedro was doing; Pedro was running his group for money, whereas the Reverend was running his group for the "common good"—or what he deemed to be the common good. Peter wasn't well-versed in the Reverend's personal philosophy, but there was no denying that it arose from a nobler rationale than Pedro's murky undertakings.

"Anyhow," Wade said to Mike, "what's up with your glasses?"

Mike adjusted them; the thick lenses gleamed. "I can't see without them."

Peter chuckled. "Wade's asking why there's tape holding your specs together."

"Oh, that? Just a li'l run-in with some Nazis, a reminder that they're coming for Smokes as soon as he steps out of his cell, and that they won't stop until he and the eleven other Jewish men in this prison are hanged."

Peter blanched. "Hanged?"

"Lynchings, I guess. Going back to their roots." Bitterness soured Mike's expression, along with a bleak, uncaring despair. Or not precisely uncaring; it was as though Mike accepted that his caring would accomplish nothing. "They suggested lynching me, too, when they were done with the Jews. They said the pipes in the laundry steam-room were perfect to hang people from. Those pipes are sturdy. And high enough off the floor."

Peter reeled. He fell back, fetching up against the wall that was Wade. A motionless Wade. Peter whirled around to look at him, to share his revulsion at what they'd just heard, but he found that Wade wasn't even there—it was as if his Wade-ness had been erased, replaced by a terrifying, stony emptiness.

"When," Wade growled, like death personified.

Mike recoiled. "Wh-What?"

"When did they say they would start killing the rest." There were no question-marks in Wade's questions. "Before or after they killed Smokes."

"After. Smokes... Smokes would be the first."

"That could be today."

"Theoretically? Anytime Smokes leaves this cell. And he'll have to leave for dinner, or he won't get any. He can't just rot in here and starve forever."

"He won't have to skip dinner. Not if I have a say in it."

"Wade?" A spike of anxiety pierced Peter's heart. Wade couldn't mean to... Could he...? Pedro had warned them that he wouldn't support Wade and Peter in any anti-Nazi activity, so if Wade instigated an epic beatdown with witnesses present, he could go to solitary.

Mike was just as skeptical. "What'll you do, man, take down all two dozen of them? That's impossible. Even if you did, the guards would catch you before you got through them all."

"The guards won't be there." Wade's tone was flat, emotionless, dead. He cracked his knuckles. "Nobody will summon them. Because you and half of your pals from the Reverend's cute little coterie will distract them, while the other half will be there to testify that whatever happens in the boiler room, I'm not accountable for it. Hell, maybe the Nazis had themselves a bar fight. They can't accuse me of beating them up if they can't even prove I was there."

Mike sat up slowly. A grudging, unwilling hope flickered in his eyes. "You... You'll deal with them? For me and for Smokes?"

"For you, and for those eleven men."

Peter couldn't fault Wade's motives, but... "Wade, *no*. Are you—are you going to kill—"

"Pete." Wade was vibrating with tension, his fists still clenched. He'd begun pacing in the cell, caged and feral, his eyes fixed on the distance, like he could already see the carnage unfolding before him. "Don't interfere."

"Interfere...?" How could it be interfering? Peter and Wade were in this together; they were in everything together. "Are you kidding?"

"Some pests don't go away until they're eliminated," Wade said, as implacable as a rock. "They only breed, like termites, until they're exterminated."

"Oh, so you're in the pest extermination industry, now? What's your company's name, Bugs-Be-Gone?"

"The Nazis aren't just pests," Mike interjected. "They're murderers."

"Not anymore." Wade jabbed a thumb at Mike. "Smokes is asleep anyway, so me 'n' Peter are going back to our cell. In the meantime, you're gonna leave Smokes here, behind the locked door, and you're gonna go and get a bunch of your friends. Ask the Reverend's permission if you have to, but be quick about it. Get them to stage a distraction away from the boiler room. That's where the Nazis will be, because that's where they always are. Or were." Wade's eyes narrowed. "Until now."

"You can't do this." Peter was gripped by an awful dread. "Wade. You can't. If it doesn't go according to plan, then what'll you do? And how are you going to fight against all those skinheads? They'll kill you, Wade. *They'll* exterminate *you*."

"They won't." Wade said it with an easy, careless dominance. There was an inevitability to him, the inevitability of a bomb; it was like there was a clock ticking inside him, counting down to a detonation. "There's a reason my kill-count is the highest in the country."

"That isn't something you should be boasting about," Peter said half-hysterically, feeling the situation slipping away from him. It was all spiraling into chaos too fast for him to cope with.

"Peter. Those assholes wouldn't be after Smokes and the other Jewish guys if I hadn't intervened. They wouldn't be so eager to make a statement to counteract mine. They don't just wanna kill these poor bastards for the sake of killing 'em—they wanna kill them as a message to *me*."

"Wade—"

"I can't let anybody die because of me. This is my responsibility. It's on me."

Peter... Peter couldn't object to that. He'd do the same if it was his fault another human being was at risk. "You'd do it even if it wasn't your responsibility. You don't fool me." A cold hollowness rang within Peter, like the hollowness of an unoccupied grave. "But what if the Reverend refuses your help and doesn't send witnesses to corroborate your innocence?"

"He will." Mike swallowed nervously. "He's against the Nazis, too. He'll back you on this. I can guarantee that."

"Then we're leaving," said Wade. "Mike, I'll expect your buddies to meet me in the boiler room. They don't hafta participate in the thrashing; I just need witnesses. And a set of spare clothes to get into afterward, because my

current clothes will be ruined. You'll have to smuggle my bloodstained uniform away." Wade banged the door of the cell open. It almost got torn off its hinges; on the bunk, Smokes stirred before sinking back into his sedative-induced sleep. "Peter. Follow me."

Peter had never heard Wade *command* him before. Not like that. "I'll drop by to see Smokes tomorrow," Peter said to Mike, hastily. "Provided today's, um, quest goes off without a hitch. I'd like to talk to Smokes once he's up and about."

"He'd like to talk to you and Deadpool, too," Mike replied. "He was mumbling about it before the drugs got to him and he keeled over."

Peter scampered after Wade as Wade exited the cell. Even Wade's bearing was different; he had the unbending, unstoppable stride of a man on a mission. It was as if Peter wasn't even there; Wade was outpacing Peter easily, preoccupied with his own thoughts. When they returned to their cell, Wade resumed pacing.

Pedro's guard had stationed himself outside, and would likely linger there after Wade departed for the boiler room. But Peter wouldn't feel safe—not when Wade would be fighting, what, twenty-four adversaries? Twenty-five?

"Wade. Wade, don't do this."

"I will," Wade snarled. "I'll fucking destroy them."

Peter sank onto their only chair. He stared vacantly at the cards on the table; the nine of spades was peeking out from under the four of clubs. "And how will you hide the fact that it's you destroying them? Even if you change your uniform, you'll have blood all over your hands. Witnesses contradicting the victims' testimonies won't mean a damn

thing if the guards see you on your way back here and you've got blood on you."

"I can plan just fine, Petey. I used to be a professional assassin. I know all about planning ops."

"This isn't an op."

"Isn't it?" Wade said, casually admitting that he was about to commit a premeditated crime. "I won't have any blood on me. It's the boiler room. There'll be plenty of water to wash my hands in."

"Yeah, *boiling water*. Because it's the *boiler room*."

"I'll be fighting a baseball team of Nazis, and you're worried about me getting scalded?"

"I have to be worried about you," Peter argued, "because you certainly aren't! A third-degree burn isn't just a scalding, Wade!"

For a moment, it seemed as though Wade would falter, as if the person Wade truly was would emerge from behind the inhuman mask that Wade's face had become—but no, that person disappeared before he ever surfaced. "It's not me you should be worrying out, Peter. It's them."

Peter shut his eyes in defeat. So he couldn't keep Wade from doing this. It had been bound to happen someday; Wade had a functional moral compass but an unfortunately dysfunctional method of applying that moral compass, and it had been unavoidable that they would have a disagreement about this.

Then there were the discrepancies that Peter had detected in Mike's account, discrepancies that were resolving

themselves into a more sinister pattern. They wouldn't discourage Wade, but Peter had to divulge his insights to Wade nonetheless—insights Peter wouldn't even have had if Pedro hadn't been subtly tutoring him, teaching Peter to analyze every scenario in terms of control—who was winning it, and who was losing it.

"This could be a trap," Peter said to Wade's back, because Wade wasn't looking at him; perhaps Wade couldn't look at him and still go through with this. "Or a test. The Reverend should be able to take care of this peril to one of his own, *on his own*. He has enough foot-soldiers to do his bidding. Why does he need you? Why would Mike portray himself as helpless after pointing out that he wasn't, because the Reverend was protecting him? Why would the Reverend's protection suddenly have evaporated? What if... What if the Reverend instructed him to win your sympathy, to see how you'd react to his plight?"

"And?" Wade sounded unconcerned. "Why would he do that?"

"Maybe the Reverend wants to see how far you're willing to go for what you think is right. Maybe he wants to see how like him you are."

"Maybe," Wade said quietly, "I'm more like him than he knows."

No. No, you're not.

Wade checked the clock. "I'm heading off. By the time I get to the boiler room, Mike should've arrived with his friends."

"And if he hasn't?"

"I'll just have to start the party without him."

Come back to me, Peter wanted to say, but didn't. It might make Wade hesitate, and at this juncture, hesitation could cost Wade his life. So Peter kept a lid on his apprehension even as Wade opened the door, even as Wade crossed the threshold. It was as if there were a string that tied them together, and it stretched thinner and thinner with every step Wade took, threatening to snap. *Let this not be our goodbye.*

Rationally, Peter knew that Wade was correct in his estimation of the odds; Wade wouldn't be the most feared prisoner at Grantham if he wasn't capable of tackling multiple opponents, nor would it have taken several armed squads to bring him down prior to his arrest.

Wade could handle this. The problem was what would happen if he did. What would it do to Wade, to unleash what he'd been repressing ever since he'd met Peter? Would Wade ever come back from that? Would Peter even recognize him if he did?

Before Wade left, Peter finally found the words he *could* say; they forced themselves out of him, ugly and unwieldy. "Promise me you won't kill anyone."

Wade jerked to a halt.

Peter's voice broke. "*Promise me.*"

"That's all I can promise," Wade said, without turning around, and then he was gone.

Chapter 16

The next hour was the worst hour Peter had ever endured, and he'd been through some pretty crappy hours. He couldn't move from his chair. He couldn't stand up. He couldn't even budge. It was as if he was frozen until Wade got back. A subcutaneous winter had frosted his veins with ice, freezing him and paralyzing him, and he was *cold*. Literally, physically cold. Wade had taken all the warmth in the world with him when he'd left.

Peter had no clue what was happening in the boiler room. He had no clue whether Wade had won, or whether he'd been beaten to death. Implausible as it was, the prospect was devastating. Peter was haunted by the image of Wade face-down in a pool of red, unmoving, trampled and abandoned in the boiler room.

If Wade wasn't back soon, Peter would go searching for him. Screw the plan. Screw his own survival. Pedro's appointed guard wouldn't accompany him into an altercation with the Nazis, given that Pedro had stated his group wouldn't get involved, but so what? What would Peter's miserable existence be worth without Wade?

Memory after memory of Wade assailed Peter—Wade chasing peas around on his plate at lunch and grouching about how he was Mulder and the peas were little green men; Wade wordlessly shielding Peter from view in the showers; Wade looking at Peter as if Peter was everything to him. Everything.

Peter couldn't tolerate a single second in this hellhole without Wade to talk to him, love him, be with him. Wade was the only reason—the only—

The door creaked ajar.

Peter sprang up, and the chair fell with a clatter.

Would it be Wade? Or would it be Mike, delivering a terrible message? Or the guards, informing Peter that his cellmate had been murdered and that he'd been reassigned to a new cell?

Peter would break. Without Wade, there was nothing for Peter in prison. Absolutely nothing.

And then Wade walked into their cell.

Peter all but crumpled to the floor. A sob tore out of him, and he clutched his chest, overcome by a joy so complete that it bordered on agony.

Wade was back. Wade was *home*.

Peter yearned to run into his embrace, yearned to be held and cosseted and reassured. But he hadn't tottered forward more than a few steps before he realized that the man he was going to only bore a superficial resemblance to Wade. That man had Wade's figure, Wade's form, but the soul that looked out from behind his eyes was... different.

Peter stopped in his tracks. His stomach plummeted.

Wade stood there, watching him. It was like being watched by a stranger, by a denizen of another realm—a realm of shadows that Wade had ventured into, only to be possessed by them. Those shadows swirled inside him, infiltrating him and giving him a cruel, bestial cast.

This wasn't Peter's Wade—or if it was, then he was hidden far beneath all that cruelty, a cruelty that could only be the product of sheer, unadulterated fury, of a berserker's rage. Still, Peter was overwhelmingly relieved to see that Wade was uninjured. What was disturbing was that Peter's relief

was warring with a peculiar unease, an unease he'd never experienced with Wade before.

Some vestige of self-preservation made Peter remain where he was; this version of Wade didn't appear to be particularly receptive to affection. Moreover, Peter got the distinct impression that if he so much as shifted, Wade would follow his movements like a hawk. This Wade was primed to attack, and while Peter had no doubt that Wade would never harm him, it just seemed... unwise... to tempt fate. Because, even if Wade didn't unleash himself on Peter, he might go out there and unleash himself on everyone else.

"You... You aren't scalded." Peter gestured awkwardly at Wade's hands. He longed to hold them, cradle them, check that every callus and scar was unchanged. But, again, he restrained himself. He had to, until Wade cooled off and was restored to his former self.

"No," said Wade calmly, as if he hadn't just butchered two dozen men—because Peter was suddenly, spine-chillingly sure that he had. "I didn't wash my hands directly. I soaked one of the bedsheets being laundered there in the boiling water and wiped myself clean. Mike smuggled the sheet away to dispose of it."

"Great, because otherwise, your parboiled paws would be a dead giveaway." Peter winced. "No emphasis whatsoever on dead."

Wade continued watching Peter. Uncharacteristically, he didn't ask if Peter was all right, and Peter didn't ask if Wade had defeated his opponents, because he clearly had. It was equally obvious that Mike had lived up to his

promise of bringing along a spare uniform, because Wade's clothes were spotless.

Wade had succeeded. At what price, Peter couldn't begin to calculate.

Did calculations even have a place in this situation? Peter couldn't... He couldn't stay away from Wade much longer. It was unnatural. Every atom in him craved for Wade, even if the Wade he'd fallen in love with was lost somewhere in the depths of this interloper. Peter was confident he would get his Wade back, if only he kissed Wade, if only he reminded Wade of what they had.

But he couldn't do that. Not yet. Not unless he *knew*.

The question bubbled up and out of Peter like acid, corrosive and caustic, eating into him. "Did you kill?"

For the first time since Wade's return, an actual emotion flitted across his pitiless countenance, too swiftly for Peter to identify. "No."

"Did you want to kill?"

A tremor ran through Wade, like the tremor before an earthquake. "Yes."

"But..." Peter gulped. "But you didn't."

"Perhaps I should have killed them. It would've been more merciful." Wade approached Peter on soundless feet, as stealthily as if he was still on a mission, stealing behind a victim before slitting their carotid artery. "Would you like to hear what else I did?"

"No," Peter whispered. It was only now that Peter caught a whiff of the scent emanating from Wade—a faint, coppery scent. That... that was blood, wasn't it? Peter could smell blood on Wade, even though there wasn't a stain anywhere on him, because Wade must've been just that thorough with the cleanup. Just that professionally thorough. "No. Don't..."

"Don't what, Peter? Don't speak the truth? You should know the man you're sleeping with. Living with. You ought to know."

"I do. I do know you."

"Do you?" Wade prowled toward Peter, his gait rolling like a tiger's, purposeful and intent. There was no sympathy, no humanity in his expression—it was avid and vacant, like an animal's.

Peter shrank back.

"Peter." Wade's voice was low and deadly, and he was radiating a menace, a danger that Peter hadn't seen in months. "I'm not a nice guy. I never have been. You haven't seen what I do, have you? What got me in here? You've never seen me kill. You've never seen me *shudder* when hot blood splatters my face, because it feels just that fucking good."

Peter gasped. Wade was so close, all heat and muscle and tightly leashed power, looming and focused, every part of him a threat. In their dingy cell, Wade's knife-like eyes glinted with a hunger utterly unlike what Peter was accustomed to—not lust, not ardor, not devotion. This was a blood-hunger, a death-fever, a barely-contained wildfire on the brink of spreading unchecked and consuming all in its path.

Peter's pulse kicked up, sweat prickling under his shirt. Wade had never been like this near him. Not where Peter could see. Yes, Wade had erupted into brutality on occasion, but it was always a spontaneous reaction to an external stimulus, prompted by his environment. But this? This wasn't just an automatic reflex. This was Wade thirsting for violence, actively seeking it out. Creating it. Coveting it. His face bore the stark madness of a pyromaniac, standing in front of a church with a flint, itching to set it all ablaze.

It was the face of an addict.

The face of a killer.

It should've terrified Peter, but instead it made some sleeping instinct in him *jolt* to wakefulness—the furtive instinct of prey, a fight-or-flight response rapidly morphing into something else. The splintering shock of it cracked open a fissure deep within Peter, a fissure of some molten and searing substance, primitive and vulnerable and heretofore unknown.

"I... I can't keep holding myself back." Wade's words were almost beseeching, a combination of the dark, cajoling tones of a seducer and the trembling prayers of a supplicant. "I'm a predator, Peter. I have to *hunt*. There has to be meat in my fangs, flesh on my claws. I can't just—I can't just not be myself. I love you, but I can't tame myself for you. I can't. And I shouldn't."

Peter's heart was hammering. Maybe it was wrong, and weird, but he was reacting to Wade in ways he'd never expected. He thrummed with a secret, guilty anticipation, fear and desire intermingling in him until he couldn't tell them apart. The shrinking distance between him and Wade

had the crackling electricity of the sky before a storm, the gathering pressure before a hurricane, oppressive and unbearably intense.

The air seemed to burn as it entered Peter's lungs. He was parched, a piece of flash-paper on the verge of bursting into flame. Every exposed inch of his skin felt raw and untouched, and an incredulous frisson wracked through him, revealing itself in a quiver.

Wade's eyes darkened.

"You gotta stop me, Pete," Wade murmured, swaying closer drunkenly, his gaze fixed on Peter's mouth. "You gotta stop me..."

Peter's lips parted.

Wade drew in an unsteady breath.

Peter was shaking, and Wade was getting nearer and nearer, an intolerable tenderness mixing with the torment that twisted his features—his dear, beloved features, but now they looked so *foreign*, so alien, so starved. There was despair in them, and a sort of misery, but also the relief of surrender—of surrendering to one's demons.

And Peter couldn't let Wade feel like that. He just couldn't. He couldn't leave Wade alone in that abyss, scrabbling against the blackness and slowly, inevitably becoming it. This was a side of Wade that Peter had never encountered, but it was a side of the man he loved, nonetheless. He wasn't about to turn away from it. No matter how frightening it was.

So he reached up to Wade's face, his fingertips sliding feather-light over Wade's jaw, finding Wade's mouth and

tracing it. Wade shivered, and when Peter pulled him down for a kiss, Wade went with him.

The moment their mouths met, it was as if they ignited. The electricity from before flared to life between them, sparking and leaping, the dazzling fusion of two circuits merging. Wade moaned, a stunned, helpless noise, and Peter surged *up*, meeting Wade more than halfway, rising on his toes to kiss Wade so forcefully that Wade stumbled back under his weight.

But Wade quickly regained his footing. He enveloped Peter in his arms, his biceps solid and unyielding, and lifted Peter effortlessly.

Peter groaned. He wrapped his legs around Wade's waist and *rutted*, harder than he could ever remember being. His mind was blank, arid, filled with nothing but a devouring greed. His teeth dug into Wade's lower lip and his fingernails scoured Wade's back. He was trapped in a strange, savage delirium, with Wade's tongue fucking his mouth and Wade's cock jutting out beneath his ass, god, it was huge, and Peter wanted—

They staggered back against the door, Peter's skull only just avoiding collision with it when Wade's hand rose up to cup his head, not so much to protect Peter but to tangle in Peter's hair, yanking it so that Peter had to hiss and arch, baring his throat, silently begging for Wade to bite him there, bruise him, mark him.

But Wade only tore himself away and lurched backward. He was panting, his eyes wide and horrified, his erection tenting his trousers. "Peter," he rasped, hoarse and shattered. He squeezed his eyes shut. "*Peter*. I'm sorry."

Peter's body sang like a plucked chord, vibrating with urgency. He had to come so badly that he couldn't think straight. His knees shook. His hips twitched upward, desperate for contact, and he ground the heel of his palm viciously against his clothed dick, half-punishment and half-tease. But he had to let go before he came right there, on the spot, flooding his pants.

He wished he could. Oh, how he wished. But he had to get back to his senses. Wade needed him.

"Don't," Peter said harshly, breathlessly. "Don't ever apologize for touching me. For *wanting* me. Not ever."

"Even though I'm a monster?"

"You're not a monster."

"No," Wade said sarcastically, hatefully. "Just monstrous."

"Even if you're monstrous, you're still not a monster. It's a behavior. It's not who you are." Peter struggled to compose himself. His groin throbbed; he did his best to disregard it. "There's a difference."

"Is there? I... I was too rough with you. I could've hurt you. I almost bit you."

"Wade, leaving hickeys on people is perfectly normal."

"Not when you're thinking about killing *other* people while you're doing it."

"Okay." What could Peter even say to that? "Fair point."

"That's not... That's not what it should ever be about. Not with you. You deserve better. Heck, anyone would deserve

better than being terrorized by a—”

“I’m not terrorized, Wade. Do I seem terrorized to you?”

Wade released a shaky exhalation. “You should be. And I should be ashamed of kissing you when I had those thoughts in my head, thoughts of rending and maiming and killing. I dirtied you with... with...”

“I’m not a handkerchief, Wade. You can’t dirty me. It’s not like you stabbed somebody on top of me and let their corpse bleed onto me. All your mind did was wander—”

“*Wander?*” Wade said disbelievingly. “That wasn’t wandering, Peter, that was me taking a very deliberate walk on the dark side.”

“Only as deliberate as the actions of an addict. You... You can conquer this, Wade. You’re strong enough to not allow this temptation to send you back into hell.”

“Maybe I belong in hell.”

“If you do,” Peter met Wade’s eyes squarely, “then so do I. Because I belong with you. And I’ll go with you into hell if I have to.”

“That’s not what you’ll be saying when you’re frying to a crisp.”

“Hey, I like fried stuff. I’ve been daydreaming about KFC ever since I got jailed. Man, that potato-and-gravy...”

Wade laughed. It was a broken laugh, jagged and sharp, but a laugh nevertheless. “I bet the inmates fantasize about KFC as much as they do about sex. Possibly more.”

"Exactly. So don't cook up all that drama in your head. Just cuddle with me." Peter dropped onto their bunk with a bounce, lying down and smoothing the mattress beside him. "C'mere, you scary beastie, you. Lemme pet you until we both fall asleep."

Wade hesitated. "Not heavy petting, I hope?"

"Nah. Don't wanna make my case of blue balls any worse. It's practically a medical emergency by now. You're such a mean bastard."

"So I've been told." Wade paused. "Not in the context of orgasms, though."

"Honestly. Making out with you is like downing eight bottles of Viagra pills and winding up with an erection that lasts five hundred hours."

Wade choked on a chortle. "That sounds serious."

"It's catastrophic. My dick's about to stage a hostile takeover."

"What, like Walmart?"

Peter blew Wade a raspberry. "Don't procrastinate and get over here. We'll just ignore our boners. Like we always do." Peter huffed. "Wow, our marital life is so fulfilling. It's like we're priests sworn to abstinence, torturing ourselves with our own celibacy."

Wade cautiously joined Peter on the bunk. "Kinky."

"Figured you'd say that." Peter hugged Wade to him, mumbling into Wade's collarbone. "Picture that, would you?"

Me in a priest's robe, all humble and shy, confessing to my dirty, dirty sins and asking for absolution..."

"Pete. Aren't we supposed to be *ignoring* our erections?"

"You're right. I should pipe down. If I keep going, our dicks will get hard enough to replace construction beams. And what'll we do then? We won't be able to use them ever again without, like, demolishing a whole building. And people live in buildings, Wade. Innocent people. Entire families. How could we boot them out onto the roadside? So what if we need to get our rocks off? Could it justify making hundreds of families homeless?"

"How did your sexual frustration turn into a housing crisis?"

"I dunno, dude. I'm free-associating. It's therapeutic."

"No wonder you need therapy after being mauled by me."

Peter smacked Wade with the pillow. Given that it had the density of concrete, it was quite the smack. "Don't be a doofus. Kiss me."

Wade kissed him on the forehead, carefully and reluctantly.

"You just kissed me like a distant grand-aunt who doesn't love me but has no heirs and therefore no choice but to leave me her estate."

"Would you quit it with the housing references?"

"Bro, I'm in jail. All I can think about is housing. Adequate housing. Preferably with windows that can open. And functional air-conditioning. And a garden. A summer garden would be awesome." Peter contemplated it wistfully.

“Mostly because you’d look sexy mowing the lawn, shirtless and in board shorts.”

“Why will I be doing the mowing?”

“Because I’ll be indoors with the A/C on, feet up on our coffee table and sipping a Mai Tai.”

“So you don’t believe in the equal division of labor.”

“Who said I won’t be working? I’ll spend all night working myself on your—”

“Peter,” Wade said, strangled. “Stop. We’re ignoring our erections, remember?”

“Right.”

“Right.”

Peter fiddled with the sleeve of Wade’s new uniform. They still hadn’t spoken about the fight, or about what had happened to the Nazis, or about Wade’s potential alliance with the Reverend. And perhaps they shouldn’t, not until Wade had emerged from his funk. It was like Wade was undergoing withdrawal; he’d just had a high, and now, he was crashing. The least Peter could do was wait before reminding Wade of his drug. They’d discuss it, they *would*, but not today. Not tonight.

Even if, this very night, the Nazis would probably be occupying all the beds in the infirmary. If they hadn’t already been rushed to a proper hospital, that is. From what Peter could deduce from observing Wade, their injuries would be too grievous to be treated in the poorly-equipped infirmary.

"You... You mentioned your dad, once," Peter said tentatively. "Did he... Is he why're you're...?" *Why you're terrified of intimacy?*

"My dad was an alcoholic. A typical wife-beating asshole. He hit my mom. He hit me. And I can't... I can't let loose like that. Not with you. Not when that's what I might end up doing." Wade quietened. Then, as if it took all his courage, he confessed, "It's in me, Pete. What was in him. The same vile, mindless, destructive evil. What if I let it escape, like he did with the people he claimed to love? I won't be able to take it if I become him, Pete. I just won't."

"And that's why you won't become him. Because hurting your loved ones sickens you." Peter looked earnestly into Wade's eyes. "Wade, you couldn't be a domestic abuser if Satan himself was hissing in your ear and Dr. Strangelove was rewiring your brain. You could never hurt me. Not really."

"What defines 'really'? 'Cause you have to explain it to me, Petey. I've no idea what's real most of the time."

"This is real." Peter twined his fingers with Wade's, bringing their linked hands up to kiss Wade's knuckles, as softly as he could. "We're real. And what defines 'really' hurting me is doing anything I don't consent to. Not that you ever have. Or that you ever will. Cripes, you're more likely to refuse doing what I *am* consenting to. But if I want you to bite bruises into my clavicles? You're totally welcome to do that, damn it."

Wade chuckled tiredly. "Should I consider it a blanket approval?"

"Blanket? That's too small. It's more like a fifty-thousand-foot carpet."

“Made of wool?”

“Granite. Made of *granite*.”

Minutes passed. Just when Peter was drifting off, Wade said, out of nowhere: “S-Sorry. I shouldn’t have asked you to do that.”

Peter blinked sleepily; it was as if his proximity to Wade was untying all the knots inside him, easing him into restfulness after all that panic of waiting for Wade, of worrying whether Wade was even alive. Now, Wade was back, and peace suffused Peter to the core. It was like a shot of morphine. “To do what?”

“I shouldn’t have asked you to stop me. Back when we were—before we kissed. I shouldn’t have asked you that. Stopping me isn’t your job, Peter. I can’t let that be your job. *I* have to learn how to stop me. Not you. I can’t force you to do for me what my dad forced my mom to do for him. I can’t force you to be responsible for my actions. That’s on me. It’s all on me, and only on me.” As if it were an oath, Wade pledged, “I will master myself. I will. Because if I don’t, I’ll drag you into the same pit my father dragged my mother into.”

Peter ached. He’d guessed that Wade’s childhood had been traumatic, but this was horrid. “Wade...”

“It’s abuse, isn’t it? When you act like shit and then blame the people around you for it, because somehow *they* should be stopping you from acting like shit? That’s abuse. Putting someone in that position is abuse. And I won’t abuse you, Peter. I... I refuse to.”

Peter tucked Wade in against him, giving Wade a space where it was warm, where it was safe. Where Wade didn’t

have to be afraid. "What'll you do to master yourself?"

"I'm still figuring it out." Wade curled an arm around Peter and reeled him in. "But I'll get there. I'll definitely get there. I can feel it in my gut."

"You don't even have a gut. Thanks to our depressing prison food, malnutrition and weight loss have sloughed away any gut you may have had." Peter patted Wade's tummy consolingly. "But I'd love to grow old with you and get a beer-gut with you."

"Matching beer-guts?" Wade grimaced. "Now that's the height of romance."

"Ain't it, though? We'll belch into each other's kisses."

"Yikes," said Wade. "Just. Yikes."

"I know." Peter snuggled up to Wade contentedly. "I'm a gifted and original thinker and you're the adoring audience for my brilliant hypotheses. I'm practically giving a TED talk, here."

"Go to sleep, genius," Wade said, with such a fervent, pained fondness that Peter had to peck him on the lips again.

"Yeah, yeah. Dinner's in an hour." Peter yawned. "Will *you* sleep?"

Wade buried his nose in Peter's hair, his arms tightening around Peter. "I'll try."

Chapter 17

Waking up beside Wade was as comforting as always, with Wade's massive body curving around Peter's on their narrow bunk, a wall of sheer muscle between Peter and the world.

Peter spent ages just staring at Wade's face, because Peter was a sap like that, and Wade was insecure about having his scars stared at when he was awake. This had become a morning ritual for Peter whenever he managed to wake up first; he was perpetually aware of how much lesser his sentence was compared to Wade's, and of how precious the sight of Wade's sleeping face was as a result, a sight that Peter would have to live without after he got out. The knowledge of their unavoidable parting was a strange, subtle pain, a sweet, barbed ache that had Peter leaning in to kiss Wade on the cheek.

“Mmrr?” said Wade, like a drowsy cat. A very large, very intimidating cat, most likely a panther or a lion. His hand certainly was as heavy as a lion’s paw on Peter’s waist.

“Wade, it’ll be breakfast soon.” Peter poked Wade with his toes. “We have to freshen up.”

“Hmrrm.”

Peter wriggled out of Wade’s grasp, scaled the rocky mountain that was Wade’s physique, and climbed out of the bunk. By the time he was done brushing his teeth, Wade was up, too, half-lidded and watching Peter from the mattress.

Peter flushed, remembering how Wade had kissed him yesterday. How Wade had almost *fucked* him yesterday.

“Good morning,” Peter croaked.

“Mornin’,” Wade responded, getting out of the bunk himself and ambling to the sink. Peter did some surreptitious ogling as Wade walked by, raking his eyes up and down Wade’s musculature, marveling at those powerful thighs and rippling pectorals.

Of course, just to complete Peter’s humiliation, Wade caught him looking and waved his fingers. “Hello? Earth to Spider-Man? I’m up here.”

Peter snatched his eyes away. “It’s your fault,” he said accusingly.

Wade quirked an eyebrow, setting his toothbrush down next to Peter’s. “What is?”

“Being all big and stacked.”

“Stacked?” Wade sniggered. “Who am I, Pamela Anderson?”

“Your *Baywatch* reference won’t distract me from my mission. As much as I’d enjoy seeing you jogging down a beach toward me, your pecs bouncing with every step.”

Wade gaped at Peter. “Wh-what?”

“But no. I have a mission.” Peter squared his shoulders. “I was thinking about it all night,” he admitted, with every ounce of bravery he had. “Thinking about it nonstop.”

“Thinking about what?” Wade asked, like he had no clue how keyed up Peter was. The bastard.

“How you, um, stopped before—before marking me.” Peter fidgeted, blushing. “You’re so mean. I can’t jack off while fantasizing about it, not even in our cell, or you’ll tear the door off its hinges and escape.”

“Sounds like a great escape strategy to me,” Wade said dryly. “Developing superhuman strength just to get away from temptation.”

“C’mon. Give me a real hickey. Please?” Peter peered up at Wade through his eyelashes. It was corny, and it was deliberate, and Wade would see right through it, but it would work. Wouldn’t it?

“Christ,” Wade muttered. “You’re killing me.”

“Look, I’ll help.” Peter tilted his head back and pointed at where his throat met his jaw. “Here. Bite me here.”

“You don’t have to draw me a map.”

“Except for how I do, or you’ll get lost in the scary woods of your subconscious like Red Riding Hood, never to emerge again.”

“Shouldn’t *you* be Red Riding Hood? And shouldn’t I be the wolf?”

“Then act like a wolf and bite me, already. Sheesh.” Peter tugged on Wade’s arm pleadingly, ratcheting up the wattage of his puppy eyes by two hundred percent.

Wade swore. Softly and creatively. He tipped Peter’s chin up, pressing his lips to it in a chaste, affectionate kiss before sliding his mouth to the precise location Peter had specified.

Peter inhaled sharply.

Wade just breathed, for a moment, like he was pacing himself. Or disciplining himself. Every susurrant of his breath against Peter’s skin was delicious, a promise and a tease.

And then Wade parted his mouth, a slick-slow bloom of heat, and *licked*.

“Oh,” Peter said feebly, a current sizzling through him. He canted his neck in a blatant appeal for more, grabbing at Wade’s shirt demandingly. “Gimme, gimme, *gimme...*”

There was a grazing of teeth, too light to be even remotely threatening, and then a delicate bite, and then another, and another, the bites getting deeper by degrees. Peter shouldn’t have been turned on by how *planned* those bites were—clearly designed to mark Peter effectively while preventing Wade from losing control—but Peter loved it.

He loved how cared for those bites made him feel, and how they simultaneously inflamed his imagination, furnishing it with image after image of Wade being just that careful with the rest of him, savoring Peter bite by meticulous bite, tasting him from end to end. God, the thought of Wade *fingering* him like that, shushing him and easing him down after every scorching addition, but still proceeding gently, implacably, reassurance after reassurance, finger after finger...

Peter whined. He was hard again, as he almost constantly was, nowadays. He couldn't resist voicing his inner desires, his most sinful dreams.

"Do you wanna fuck me?" Peter's mouth brushed Wade's ear, his lips trembling. "'Cause I want you to. I want—"

Wade shuddered. "Peter, you need to shut up *right now*."

"And you need to get naked. Also right now."

"No." Wade gave him a final bite, this one a tad too painful to be anything but a chastisement, and withdrew. "You have your hickey. Go admire it in a mirror, and leave me to my—"

"To your incredibly sizable erection? But that's such a pity."

"What's a pity is that I'm an old man in his thirties stuck with a horny nineteen-year-old that I can never keep up with."

"But I think you could keep up with me," Peter said hopefully. "For hours and hours and hours..."

"I notice how you didn't deny that I'm an old man."

"Oh, you are," Peter said sweetly. "But I'm into that. Daddy."

Wade pinched the bridge of his nose. "Peter."

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Not yet."

"Then *when*? After time travel becomes possible and we learn how to harness wormholes?"

"Wormholes would be easier to harness than you."

"There's a pun in there that I'm not going to make."

"Peter—"

"No, scratch that, I am. I'd look very pretty in a harness."

Wade choked, evidently so stunned by the picture Peter had painted that he was briefly at a loss for words. Eventually, he managed a hoarse, "...I expected your pun to be about holes."

"Psych! I'm awesome at this. I'll be awesome at sex, too. Once you teach me how to do it."

"I'm not going to teach you anything. Not until you're ready for it."

"You could make me ready. With your tongue. And your fingers. And your—"

"Peter!"

"What? That's what prepping is, isn't it?"

Wade backed off from Peter and retreated to the basin, where he washed his hands for no reason whatsoever, as if he just needed an excuse to remove himself from Peter's vicinity before he snapped and fucked Peter senseless on the floor.

Hey, Peter had gained near-telepathic powers after living with Wade for so long. He could read Wade like a book.

A very smutty book unfortunately overburdened with an oversupply of angst.

"Peter." Wade turned around to look at him. He appeared to have composed himself. Bummer. "You didn't even meet the real me until yesterday."

"That wasn't the real you. Or, uh, it was, but just a part of the real you? It wasn't the wonderful, magnificent whole."

"You know what I'm saying, Peter. Should you be signing yourself away to a stranger?"

"I can sign myself away to you? Where? Is there a form? Just show me the dotted line."

Wade frowned.

"Oh, come off it. Or don't, if you don't want to come. But at least let *me* come. Damn."

Wade frowned some more. "Lemme think about it."

"Think about it? Why don't you go with the Nike motto and 'Just Do It'?"

"Because I'm not a kid with balls for brains."

"I prefer to say 'brains for balls.' It's more intellectual."

"It's inaccurate, is what it is."

"*Wade*," Peter wheedled.

"*Peter*," Wade mimicked him. "I get it. You're young, you're enthusiastic, and your patience has stretched about as much as it can. Don't," Wade forestalled when Peter opened his mouth, "make a pun about any part of your anatomy stretching as much as it can."

"Er," said Peter, "but you just made that pun yourself? Kinda defeated the point, there, dude."

"I'll give you what you need—"

"What we *both* need."

"What we both need," Wade agreed. "Just give me a day or two to figure out how to do it so I don't cross the boundaries you don't even realize you have."

"That's because I have none."

"Yeah, you do. What you just said proves it. Nobody who understands anything about sex—or about themselves—can say that they have no boundaries. You can only say you have no boundaries if you've never explored them. Or had someone explore them with you."

Peter glared at Wade sullenly. "So explore away, Columbus."

"Never compare me to a slave-owning colonizer again." Wade strode up to Peter and glowered down at him forbiddingly. "If you don't know where your boundaries are, Peter, I'll find them for you."

“Was that supposed to be a threat?” Peter asked weakly as Wade sauntered off to the desk, like he hadn’t just said the most terrifyingly arousing—arousingly terrifying?—thing ever. “Because I’m even harder now than I was before.”

“That?” Wade said without deigning to glance at Peter, “That’s your first boundary. You’re excited by threats, but only if you trust the person you’re with to not actually harm you.” Wade picked up his cards nonchalantly. “You’re already learning. Congratulations.”

Peter plopped down onto Wade’s bunk, simmering with resentment. Let Wade give his sex lectures, then. One day, Peter would get his revenge.

Breakfast was surreal.

It was like being invisible. Nobody looked at Wade. Hell, nobody looked at Peter. And yet, invisible as they seemed to be, their presence obviously registered with the dining hall’s occupants, because aside from the pin-drop silence, there was also a mass migration away from wherever Wade and Peter went. When they sat down at a table, it was like they’d pulled out a machine gun—the prisoners who’d been sitting at the table scattered as if running for cover.

So the prison’s internal gossip system was already up-to-date with the events of yesterday—specifically, the event where Deadpool wiped the floor with the entire Nazi delegation. The spot where the neo-Nazis used to lurk in the hall was conspicuously empty, like the gap where a rotten, diseased tooth had fallen out.

Thank god it had fallen out.

But that wasn't all.

Nobody leered at Peter. Nobody. *That* hadn't happened before.

"What's going on?" Peter asked Wade, *sotto voce*. "I get that they're scared of you, but why're they avoiding me, too? Not that I'm complaining."

"Well, you're my prison wife who still adores me after I blew a gasket and trashed twenty-five men. Until now, they presumed you were containing me. Now, they're not so sure. To them, it looks like you were egging me on."

"Egging y—no, I wasn't!"

"I mean, we visited Smokes together and then all the Nazis got whacked. That looks like a team effort. I've never gone that crazy before. Not before you arrived. As far as everyone's concerned, I'm the brawn of this operation, and you're the brains. They've heard that you've formed an alliance with Pedro, and now, you may've formed an alliance with the Reverend and sicced me on the Nazis."

"So I'm a diabolical mastermind? I dunno whether to be flattered or appalled. Very, very appalled."

"How about both?" Wade grinned. "You've risen up in rank from Miss Polly Parker to Lex Luthor. If Lex Luthor was a power bottom."

"I haven't bottomed for you yet," Peter said vindictively, because it was Wade's responsibility that he hadn't. "And who's to say Lex Luthor wasn't a power bottom?"

"You've got to be kidding. He'd top Superman anytime."

"You're wrong. You're so very, very wrong. A control freak like Luthor would relish giving up control in bed."

"By that logic, Pedro's a bottom."

Peter made a moue. "I didn't need to picture that."

Wade scowled. "You'd better not be picturin' it."

"Please. Like I'd be into Pedro. Or into topping." When Wade coughed out a shocked laugh, Peter said, "What? Like you don't know I'm the bottomiest bottom ever."

"'Bottomiest' isn't a word."

"And since when were you a stickler for proper spelling?" Peter scooped up his wiggly, slimy, undercooked scrambled eggs with his fork. Ugh. They were practically raw, resembling a semi-sentient protein jelly more than they did food. Still, beggars couldn't be choosers. Peter started to eat, but he wasn't even midway through his revolting breakfast when the guard named Yaxley materialized at his elbow.

Wade leveled a look at the guard—a single, flat look—and Yaxley jumped backward by, like, a yard. It was hilarious.

"Parker," said Yaxley, paling at being within striking distance of the infamous Deadpool. "The Correctional Counselor wants to see you."

"Ms. Cortez?" Peter was confused. "Why?"

"Because she just does. You don't get to ask questions, boy."

Shit. Maybe Cortez was going to grill Peter about his cellmate's whereabouts last night. If so, she'd be sorely disappointed by his answer.

Or maybe this was about Peter's hacking gig. Either way, Peter was in trouble.

"Peter," Wade began, but Peter hushed him and got up.

Peter stood proudly, mindful of all the eyes on him, and equally mindful that he had a newly-fomented reputation as a fearless, manipulative mastermind to cement. He hadn't planned on getting that reputation quite so early, but he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. He had to live up to his formidable new status; if he didn't, he'd ruin his long-term plans and all the benefits he might gain from them. Including the benefit of being left the fuck alone.

So Peter strolled after Yaxley like he was unconcerned, like the anxiety of seeing the notoriously stern Correctional Counselor wasn't burning a hole in his stomach.

Wade watched Peter go, his own hands clenched around his knife and fork.

I'll be fine, Peter endeavored to communicate to Wade telepathically. *I hope*.

Loretta Cortez was Grantham's Correctional Counselor. She was a plump, middle-aged woman in a powder-blue blouse and silver earrings, whose motherly appearance was

belied by her unfeeling, uncompromising eyes. Eyes she sized Peter up with, head to foot.

Peter flinched. It was like having a steel scrubber applied to his soul, scraping away what was on the surface to reveal what was within. Cortez was like a mixture of Aunt May and Pedro's grandma; Peter bet that if there was a League of Petrifying Mother Figures, all three of them would be members of it.

"Have a seat," said Cortez, and promptly slid a manila folder toward Peter once he was sitting. "And open that."

Peter picked up the manila folder hesitantly, flicking it open.

He almost dropped it when he saw what was in it.

A photo. Photos. Lots of photos.

Photos of bodies. Mangled bodies in various states of disfigurement. One had an arm broken off like a twig, dangling off a shoulder with nothing but skin connecting it, the joint inside visibly ripped apart. Another had legs wrenched backward at an unnatural angle, while a third had a face that was unrecognizable, because it had been smashed into a pulp. A fourth had vomit coating the entire torso, frothing out of a jaw that had been dislocated, while a fifth was bent almost in half, a section of white, bony spine protruding from the flesh of the back.

Peter gagged.

Bile rose in his throat, along with a bubbling, putrid horror.

Because he *knew* what photos these were. He did, because he'd seen the same violence in Wade's eyes, last night. This

was what Wade had done. This was what he'd tried to tell Peter he had done, except that Peter hadn't had the guts to confront it then.

He was confronting it now. Not voluntarily, and not of his own accord, but fate was determined to educate him about what the man he was in love with was capable of.

This wasn't the sane, proportional, justifiable punishment of a group of murderous Nazis.

This was butchery.

Peter lifted his eyes to Cortez. They stung, but he couldn't cry. Not now. Not here. "This is horrible," he said to her, honestly. He didn't have to fake the tremor in his voice. "This—what is this?"

"You know what it is." Cortez was scrutinizing him keenly. Unwaveringly.

"I... I don't. I mean, I can guess. With what everybody is saying happened yesterday."

"Oh?" Cortez reclaimed the folder, flipping it closed. "And what are they saying?"

"That the Nazis got dealt a blow last night."

"That, Peter," Cortez said, as though Peter were a pal who had permitted her to address him by his given name, "was more than just a blow. That was ruthless, systematic eradication, with intent to terrorize any leftovers of the Nazi movement in this prison and to dissuade them from acting on their agenda."

"Isn't..." Peter adjusted his collar. He was sweating profusely, a sickly fever-sweat. "Isn't that a good thing?"

Cortez tapped the folder. "One of the prisoners targeted last night will be on kidney dialysis all his life. The one with the fractured spine will be partially paraplegic for all of *his* life. Every other victim will sustain lifelong wounds, and those that are not permanently disabled will still be hospitalized for weeks, if not months. They are all in pain, Peter. Terrible, terrible pain."

Peter's hands were shaking. He placed them on his knees and attempted to look calm. "I don't know why that concerns me."

"Again," said Cortez, "you know why. I'm relieved to see that you are as disgusted by the photos as any decent person would be. Surely you would be eager to turn in the perpetrator of such unspeakable acts."

I kissed the perpetrator yesterday, while he was still smelling of these men's blood. I wanted him to fuck me. I still want him to fuck me. And right now, that's making me want to throw up. "Absolutely," Peter said aloud. "I would. If I knew who it was. But I don't."

Cortez gazed at him steadily.

Peter—despite his every cell urging him to rush to a corner of the office and retch into a bucket that wasn't there—gazed back. "Maybe they deserved it," he said hollowly. "Isn't 'systematic eradication' what the Nazis believe in? They're just getting a taste of their own medicine."

"Including those that were barely eighteen, who had been raised in the movement and were socialized into it from childhood?"

Peter refused to look away. "Nazis are Nazis."

"I agree," Cortez concurred, without missing a beat. "They are hateful creatures. But, hateful or not, they are still human, and still protected by human laws. Laws that forbid their dismemberment at the hands of an insane vigilante."

"A vigilante *you* think I'm sharing a cell with."

"Yes, Peter," Cortez said wryly. "That vigilante. If you give an official statement against him, we can lock him up in solitary, re-house you at a distant facility, and ensure that he doesn't bother you for the remainder of your sentence. Wilson may have intimidated you into silence, but if we offer you protection, you may be more amenable to testifying that he was not present in your cell last evening."

"Except that he was present," Peter insisted. "He was fu—he was—you know what he was doing to me."

This time, it was Cortez who flinched. "We... Your placement in his cell was a regrettable oversight."

Peter's lips twisted, recalling how scared he'd been that first night with Wade, how positive he'd been that his future held nothing but rape and torture in it, because the prison had all but tied him to a stake and sacrificed him to the resident dragon. "An oversight, huh?"

"An oversight we would be more than willing to correct if you spoke out against your abuser. Imagine not having to be at his mercy ever again."

Imagine not being held hostage by you, you mean. If you were offering me freedom from my abuser out of the kindness of your own heart, you wouldn't make it conditional on my testimony. You would offer it regardless.

But you've chosen to continue holding my own rape over my head, just so you can convince me to testify against my cellmate, someday. "No," said Peter. "I appreciate the offer, but I can't bear witness to something that didn't happen. I still have that much of a conscience left. And Wade Wilson did not leave our cell after dinner yesterday, not even for a second. He was too busy being balls-deep in my ass." Peter said it unflinchingly. Like it was the truth. "Besides, shouldn't you have plenty of other witnesses?"

Cortez grimaced.

"You don't, do you? That's why you had to resort to me. Because none of the Nazis are in any condition to speak up, and even if they were, you'd still need independent, corroborating witnesses that didn't have a personal stake in the conflict. But you couldn't find any witnesses, could you? And you can't charge Wade without proof." Peter smiled thinly, the acid that was churning in the back of his throat receding somewhat as he remembered Wade's earliest lessons about bluffing. "Sorry about that."

"The only people hanging around the boiler room were members of the Reverend's group."

"Ask them, then," Peter said, knowing full well that they were a part of the conspiracy against the Nazis, and that not even Mike—who'd likely seen the carnage himself—would testify against anyone who took out the Nazis. "They'll corroborate my account, which is that Wade Wilson was nowhere near the boiler room yesterday."

Cortez sighed. Suddenly, she looked drained. "Peter Parker," she said, "whatever version of the Stockholm Syndrome has led to your misplaced loyalty, I deeply pity you for it. I also pity these young men, who, despite serving

time for their crimes as judged by the courts, were also punished beyond the extent of the law and will carry that punishment with them for the rest of their lives.” She sighed again. “That brings our conversation to a close, then. I see that you do not wish to testify.”

Peter couldn't bring himself to look at the manila folder. So he didn't. He looked, instead, at the other paraphernalia on the desk, including a sheet of paper that was upside-down and had a watermark on the upper left corner, a watermark that read—

“Rebirth,” Peter blurted, sitting up so quickly that he almost gave himself whiplash. “That's... Ms. Cortez, forgive me for asking you this before I leave, but what's that?”

Cortez didn't seem surprised by the changing of subjects; she must have intuited that he'd had just about enough of the unpleasant subject of what had happened to the Nazis. “Project Rebirth. It's a federal project that'll be rolled out in prisons across the country. You'll hear about it soon enough.”

“It j-just,” Peter stammered, “it looks like it could be a reform program. Rebirth, y'know. So you're reborn.” Peter gesticulated awkwardly. “Could be useful in getting back into the community and, like, finding jobs and stuff. Maybe.”

“Why, are you interested in reform programs?”

“Yes?” Peter squeaked, because what else could he say? He couldn't admit that he didn't think he had any criminal habits to reform, and that he was only curious because he was already acquainted with what Project Rebirth was all about, and was vehemently opposed to it.

An approving glint entered Cortez's stony eyes, and she nodded firmly. "Excellent. I'll put you down for any reform programs we may have incoming. Project Rebirth isn't a reform program, insofar as I've been informed, but some sort of federally-funded research program that'll go live in a couple of months; we don't have the details yet. So I can't put you down for that, as it is a different type of program altogether. You'll have to sign up for it on your own, on an individual basis, with a contract mediated by your own lawyer."

"Okay," Peter replied dully, even as a cold, prickling foreboding made him break out in goosebumps. In mere months, Project Rebirth would be unleashed upon the unsuspecting prisoners of Grantham. And, knowing Osborn, any lawyers advising the prisoners would be bribed or threatened into counseling them to take the contract. Peter would have to sound the alarm before that happened.

"But!" Cortez rapped the desk decisively. "There are other pathways for you. Our previous reform program is being phased out by the state government, and we won't have a working replacement until the new program's been through the vetting process. But once it's active, I'll list your name as a participant."

"Wow," said Peter, trying to inject enthusiasm into his tone despite all the talk of indiscriminate slaughter that had preceded this topic. "Yeah, please put me down for that."

"And your cellmate? Could your model behavior inspire him to reform himself?"

"What for?" Peter asked. "Wade won't be... He won't be released. Ever. He doesn't have to reform himself to fit into

the wider community. In here, being who he is—how he is—guarantees his survival.”

“But does it give him peace of mind?”

“Not getting knifed in the back is more desirable than peace of mind,” Peter stated bluntly, before tacking on a respectful, “Ma’am.”

Cortez studied him. “You may have a point.”

“A very pointy point, even. The pointy point of a pointy knife.”

Cortez’s mouth twitched. “Very well, Peter. This concludes our meeting. However, you are welcome in my office at any time to discuss reformatory behavior, even outside of a registered reform program. Do note that any such reformatory behavior will be listed on your record, and will count as ‘good conduct’ in reducing your overall sentence when it is up for its yearly re-assessment. Of course, reporting the violent crimes of your cellmate will be counted as reformatory behavior.”

Were they... Were they bribing him to snitch on Wade? This was what Peter had always assumed the prison would use him for, and why he’d initially been assigned to Wade’s cell. But Peter didn’t say anything, because he got the sense that Cortez would have no problem keeping him here and interrogating him about Wade’s misdeeds for hours if Peter showed the slightest vulnerability.

It wasn’t like she could blame him for not cooperating. Any fool that betrayed the most dangerous serial killer in this prison would be dead within twenty-four hours.

The Nazis weren't dead, though. Wade hadn't killed them. He hadn't killed them *for Peter*.

But he'd done everything short of killing them.

On the plus side, there may never be another Nazi faction at Grantham ever again. Wade was a bogeyman that would strike terror into the hearts of any wannabe Nazis as long as he was around.

On the minus side, Peter was reminded yet again of how monstrous Wade was. Not a monster—because Peter still didn't believe Wade was a monster—but monstrous. As Wade himself had admitted to being. As Wade might always be.

Perhaps Wade would never change. And perhaps Peter should decide how to feel about that, rather than procrastinating his own impending moral crisis.

Chapter 18

Pedro Corleone, as was characteristic of him, had no patience for moral crises. Especially Peter's. Before Peter could spend a suitable quantity of time angsting over Wade's propensity for violence and the prospect of Wade

always *being* violent, Tweedledee popped up around the corner like a cross between a jack-in-the-box and a giant leg of ham.

Yaxley, who was supposed to be escorting Peter back to his cell from Cortez's office, promptly evaporated. His devotion to his duty was so noble, Peter reflected sarcastically. For all Yaxley knew, the guard was abandoning Peter to a brutal rape. It clearly didn't bother him.

"The boss says to bring you to him," Tweedledee grunted, and Peter slumped in exhaustion.

"Gee, I'm so popular today." Great. As though facing Cortez hadn't been grueling enough, Peter would also be facing Pedro. What a stellar day this was turning out to be.

Peter dragged his feet as he trudged behind Tweedledee toward the library. He was wrung out, as though his psyche had been put through the turbo cycle on a washing machine. He just wanted to hide in a toilet—although it was a spectacularly bad idea to venture into a toilet alone in this hellhole—and puke into the bowl. The gruesome photos Cortez had shown him were eating into his brain like acid, their after-images consuming him with trepidation and second-hand guilt. Guilt for having a part, however indirect, in what had happened. His own guilt was even harder to deal with than the possibility that Wade—the culprit—had no guilt at all.

But Peter didn't have the luxury of emotionality when interacting with Pedro. Pedro must be in a tizzy about Wade interfering with the Nazis, given that Pedro had explicitly condemned any such actions as tactically unsound and had made it plain to Peter that such unbridled vigilantism would not be tolerated. Not by Pedro.

Yep, there Pedro was, all right, a positively thunderous cast to his mien as he presided over the library from his desk. His bodyguards were as tense as if they each had a guillotine poised above their necks. Even Tweedledee, despite being built like a tank, shriveled up like a shrinking violet and tucked himself into a corner behind the cookbooks. Given his titanic proportions, it wasn't the most successful disappearing act in history. His paunch stuck out comically from behind the shelf.

Once, Peter would've been amused by that. But today, he felt strangely disembodied, even dissociative. Intellectually, he understood that all this cringing from Pedro's cronies wasn't an encouraging sign, but Peter was so goddamn tired at this stage that he just stood there in front of Pedro's desk, numb and expressionless, unable to work up the appropriate amount of terror that Pedro's disapproval warranted.

Pedro narrowed his eyes, as if Peter's absence of fear was an insult.

"Leave," Pedro barked at his men. "All of you. I have words to exchange with Mr. Parker. In private."

Peter's heart sank. If Pedro—cool, collected Pedro—was raising his voice, it boded ill for Peter.

When Pedro's goons hesitated to leave him, Pedro roared again, "Out!"

Tweedledee and his comrades fled the library in such a hurry that they almost fell over each other in their haste to escape. Peter got the impression that Pedro's tantrum was exceedingly rare, and that not even his lackeys had any inkling of how to cope with it.

The library was as still as a tomb once the stampede had passed. A tomb that may soon be Peter's.

And in that stillness, Pedro seethed like a banked fire. The heat of his rage was palpable.

Pedro got up from his chair, strolling around his desk and toward Peter with a measured, graceful tread that was at odds with the fury contorting his face. When he reached Peter, Peter saw that Pedro's gray eyes had blackened with wrath.

Peter braced himself for a punch.

But when Pedro's hand whipped out, as fast as a striking snake, it was only to seize Peter by the collar of his prison uniform and shove him against the nearest bookshelf. The back of Peter's skull ricocheted painfully off the wooden structure behind him.

"How *dare* you?" Pedro hissed, pinning Peter to the bookshelf. "How dare you defy me, and after I offered you my aid! You said you wouldn't instigate all-out war with the Nazis because of your goody-two-shoes idealism. And yet here you are, promising blanket protection to their victims. To the weak and the powerless. Do you fancy yourself a messiah, Mr. Parker? Need I remind you what happened to the Messiah? He was crucified in public as a warning to others, a warning not to defy the system."

"I don't need a Bible Studies class," Peter wheezed.

"I said I wouldn't take on the entire prison population for you and your homicidal Daddy, and I won't." Pedro shook him. "Do you hear me? I won't."

"Then don't. It's my choice. Why're you so bothered by me putting myself in danger?"

"Why—" Pedro seemed almost apoplectic, so livid that he'd gone a dark shade of purple. "Because I have plans, Mr. Parker, plans that have begun to take you into account. And I do not take kindly to having my plans disrupted, least of all by an upstart young cub with delusions of grandeur."

"Delusions of morality," Peter amended.

"Those are infinitely more dangerous. I can't protect you from them."

"Why would you want to?"

Pedro stared at him.

And stared at him.

"Why, indeed?" Pedro murmured, as if to himself, and just like that, his rage vanished. Replacing it was a blank, opaque serenity that Peter couldn't even begin to parse; it was unnerving, seeing a human being just switch off their emotions like that, like shutting off a tap. "It would only mean upturning five out of nine of my primary strategies for the development of my group in the coming years. Strategies that require your cooperation."

"*You're* delusional if you think I'll assist you with any criminal activity."

Pedro shrugged loosely, casually, like Peter's illusion of having any agency at all was quaint and charming. He was still leaning into Peter, and as if just noticing it, he withdrew—not hurriedly but in careful, calculated increments, like everything Pedro did. Normally did. Seeing

him blow his top today had been so bizarre that Peter wondered if it hadn't been a hallucination on his part, a peculiar out-of-body experience.

Because the thought that this was what Pedro was really like, beneath his chilling mask, was alarming. Just how much self-control could one man have? It was like Pedro was the diametric opposite of Wade—Wade had no self-control except when it came to Peter, and Pedro, apparently, had all the self-control except when it came to Peter.

If Peter didn't doubt his own worth so much, he might start thinking that being the exception for so many people might mean there was something exceptional about *him*.

Nah. Peter was just a mousy li'l nerd who was miraculously making out on the regular. A miracle he was uncomfortably reminded of when Pedro's eyes flickered down to his neck—where Wade had left his very conveniently-placed hickey—and then up again, at Peter's blush.

Thankfully, Pedro didn't say anything about it, didn't poke fun or make licentious jokes. Then again, Pedro was above all that. And as if to prove how above even his own temper he was, he drew back to give Peter space and inclined his head slightly in apology.

"Forgive me. That was uncouth of me. Downright barbaric, in fact."

"No, that was honest of you. You're mad as hell, and I get why. I do. It's just... your deal was with me. Not Deadpool. He's free to ally himself with whomever he wants."

Pedro snorted. "Oh, spare me. Like he isn't your oversized pet, kept shackled on your pretty chain."

“Did you just compare me to a chain?”

“I did. And Deadpool is your ball—large and heavy and hobbling your movements.”

“At least he isn’t my balls,” Peter tittered nervously.

“If he were, I wouldn’t bother talking to you.” Pedro sat back down on his chair, gesturing for Peter to do the same.

“If it weren’t for him,” Peter countered, taking his own seat, “I wouldn’t even be alive.”

“Correction. If it *hadn’t* been for him. You no longer require his protection; my foot-soldiers follow you everywhere, keeping you safe.”

Peter huffed. “Are you trying to split me and Wade up, or what?”

“I am only acquainting you with the reality that, if you do not control him, Deadpool may become a liability to you, not an advantage. And you cannot afford liabilities, Mr. Parker. Your diminutive frame and your beauty are already liabilities most inmates cannot afford, and it is only Deadpool’s protection—and now my own—that has saved you from being penalized for them.”

A frisson of unease ran through Peter at Pedro describing him as beautiful; it was the only time Peter could recall Pedro expressing an opinion on Peter’s physical appearance. But Pedro’s tone was still detached and academic, so perhaps his comment on Peter’s ‘beauty’ was a generic aesthetic assessment and was nothing personal. Peter upbraided himself for being paranoid. He wasn’t Miss Universe, to have every dick on earth sprung for him. Heck, Pedro acted like he didn’t even have a dick, like having

sexual needs—or needs, period—was beneath him. “Are you threatening to withdraw your protection?” Peter demanded frankly.

And Pedro was back to staring at him. “No,” he said eventually. Grudgingly.

“Why not? I just cheesed you off majorly. You threw me against a bookshelf, which... Let’s just say you’re lucky Wade didn’t see that, or he’d throw the bookshelf at *you*.”

“Of course he would,” Pedro sneered dismissively, as if commenting on how inevitable it was for a newly-bought puppy to piddle on the carpet.

Except that Wade was a full-grown wolfhound and not a puppy. “Then why protect me?” Peter persisted. “Why am I not bleeding out on the library floor with a dent in my skull the size of that *Lord of the Rings* volume you have on your desk?”

Pedro chuckled. “Because I am not about to lose my bishop.”

Peter blinked. “Your what?”

“Why do you imagine Deadpool went after the Nazis? What caused him to do so?”

“His own conscience drove him to do so.”

“Don’t be mawkish, Mr. Parker. *Who* told him where the Nazis would be and all but launched him at them like a nuclear warhead?”

Peter frowned. “Mike?”

“Wrong. Mike was but a messenger. Whose message was he carrying?”

“The Reverend’s,” Peter said slowly, catching on to Pedro’s insinuation.

“Just so.” Pedro steeped his fingers in his customary villainous style. “I still support you because what has occurred has been the addition of an opponent to my chess game; an addition I had been awaiting, and that only makes you more valuable in the overall game. It does not disturb my tactical considerations; it only rearranges the order in which I will execute them.”

The term ‘execute’ made Peter antsy. “With no literal executions, I hope?”

Pedro smirked. And very conspicuously did not answer that question. What he said was, “If I prepare you for what the Reverend has in store, you might yet survive his machinations and be of use to me.”

“I... But you said the Reverend was out to influence Wade. Not me.”

“’Tis a far subtler game than that. The Reverend wishes to obtain Deadpool as his chess-piece, just as I have obtained you. His maneuvering of Deadpool vis-à-vis the Nazis is his opening shot. It’s a message to me, a reminder that he is just as powerful as I am, just as devious. Furthermore, it is an indirect means of planting division between you and Deadpool, to stir trouble in paradise, because you’re weaker apart than you are together. If he takes you both out—and, in the process, robs me of you—that’ll be quite the victory. Even more so if he secures Deadpool for himself. Admirably clever, I must admit.”

"That's..." Peter trailed off, appalled. If what Pedro was alleging was true, then the Reverend's plotting had been super effective. Wade had certainly outdone himself against the Nazis, and his savagery was certainly driving Peter away.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Pedro said. He was too refined for something as gauche as outright gloating, but there was an annoying smugness to his tone nonetheless. "Are you not already doubting your connection to Deadpool, and your ability to condone his violence? The Reverend used Smokes' cellmate as a mouthpiece to incite Deadpool to commit acts that would sever him from you, or begin to do so."

The very notion that the Reverend wanted Wade and Peter to break up was mind-blowing. But... "Don't you want me and Wade to split up, too? Wouldn't it be advantageous to you?"

"Advantageous?" Pedro mused. "No, not for me. Together, you and Deadpool are a stable isotope. Or a stable nucleus around which the rest of the prison can revolve, with you as the proton to his electron. It is more useful for me to have a predictable battleground upon which to wage my wars than the anarchy of shifting quicksand."

Peter automatically brightened at the references to atomic physics. "Do you like science? Because I—"

"Mr. Parker. Much as I would like to bond with you over our common eggheadedness and be regaled by your scientific knowledge, of which I am sure there is plenty, I would rather utilize my precious time in cautioning you and Deadpool to stay out of the Reverend's business. He can and will do his best to isolate you from one another."

“Or maybe you’d rather just isolate *us* from *him*. Keep me loyal to you and wary of any other potential ally.”

Pedro’s eyes gleamed appreciatively. “So you do have some discernment, after all.”

“I just... I can’t accept that Mike wasn’t telling the truth about how worried he was about Smokes, and about what the Nazis were planning to do to the both of them.”

“I never said he wasn’t telling the truth. Only that he was telling the truth that served his master’s purposes, and his master, Mr. Parker, is the Reverend. A man as unscrupulous as I.”

“He’s an idealist, though. You run a crime organization. He runs a—”

“Religious fundamentalist organization. Do you truly deem his motives purer than mine? Power is power, Mr. Parker, and the men who thirst for it are all the same, no matter what excuses they make to rationalize their obsession with it.”

“Of course I think his motives are purer! You told me yourself that you were a sociopath!”

“But you didn’t believe me,” Pedro pointed out, sounding weirdly triumphant about it.

Peter smacked his own forehead. “Talking with you is like... I dunno, a sadistic, criminal version of Trivial Pursuit.”

“Thank you.”

“I wasn’t flattering you.”

"At any rate," Pedro drawled, "stop balking at having your partner's very obvious foibles—"

"Psychotic violence is a foible?"

"—brought to your attention," Pedro forged ahead, undeterred. "That's who he is. You chose him. Well, circumstance chose him for you, but *you* chose to take advantage of it. Which, I'll have you know, was the chief factor in my deciding to ally myself with you; you must have potential if you were capable of such cold calculation in determining the outcome of your own sexual assault, and in converting it into a bloodless coup that transferred your assaulter's power unto you. A masterstroke."

"That's not the kinda strokin' it was," Peter said, "but thanks. I guess." He paused. "Is that still why you're allied with me?"

An unreadable expression crossed Pedro's features—more unreadable than usual, anyhow—but it flitted by in a flash. "No. Other justifications have since been added to that list."

"Yeah?" Peter was impressed. There was a *list*? Whoa. "Care to share them?"

"No." Pedro bared his teeth. "But, as I was saying, do not allow saboteurs like the Reverend to pull the strings of your relationship with Deadpool, and, by implication, Deadpool's strings. That power is yours; you worked hard to earn it, and it would be the height of imbecility to give it away now."

"If by 'worked hard' you mean fucking my way into Deadpool's affections..."

“Mr. Parker,” Pedro scolded Peter with surprising sternness, “cease reducing your achievements to simple prostitution. Which in itself is not a dishonorable profession —”

“Says the owner of several brothels.”

“—but, *if you’ll stop interrupting me*, is not what you are doing with Deadpool.”

“Then what am I doing?”

“Strategizing. As you should continue to do. Sentimentality has no place in a prison. Deadpool may be a one-man slaughterhouse, but he is *your* slaughterhouse, and giving him up at this juncture due to your own childish moral misgivings would be unwise in the extreme.”

“Morality is childish?” Peter said skeptically.

Pedro exhaled lengthily, like the nursemaid of a willful toddler that was refusing to cooperate with its own toilet training. “Yes. So I would advise you to consider not your emotions but what caused those emotions, which was the Reverend’s first step in a premeditated campaign intended to usurp your power and wrest the control of Deadpool’s reigns from you. Do not let him succeed. If for no other reason than I find it tiring. I have no intention of playing marriage therapist to you and Deadpool.”

Peter couldn’t help grinning. “But isn’t that exactly what you’re doing?”

Pedro looked ill. “The indignities you’ve lowered me to,” he lamented mock-theatrically, like his willing intrusion into Wade’s and Peter’s love life was Peter’s fault. “You’re still too much of a child to perceive every nuance of what is

happening around you, which puts me in the unenviable position of babysitting you. You'll note that I'm doing you the favor of not classifying you as incompetent, merely as inexperienced."

"Wow," Peter said dryly. "Now that's a compliment."

"It was intended as such."

"And I'm meant to buy your narrative that you're my selfless mentor?" Peter asked, unconvinced. "That you don't want to control Deadpool? I don't buy it. You want to control *everything*."

"Please," Pedro scoffed. "Like I've ever pretended to be selfless. Or like controlling you isn't tantamount to controlling Deadpool. He is so thoroughly owned by you that he would follow you to the gates of Hades and beyond. All I have to do is assure your obedience, and I shall have his. Even now, he dares not assail my men lest it cost you their added protection. Deadpool is already my pawn. I have no intention of ceding this game to the Reverend."

"Basically, by your own admission, you and the Reverend have the same goal—power. And both of you only see me and Wade as your tools."

Pedro almost beamed. "Finally," he said in relief. "Now you understand."

"Then why should I trust you and not him?"

"I'm not asking you to trust me, Mr. Parker. I am only asking you to trust my methods."

"That doesn't even make any sense!"

“Doesn’t it? You’d trust a qualified surgeon to perform life-saving surgery on you, but that doesn’t necessarily mean you’d trust him to raise your children or brew you a passable cup of coffee. What you trust in are his skills in a particular context, not his character as a whole.” Pedro’s thin, cunning mouth acquired a distinct hook. “Context, Mr. Parker. That is the core concept all my tutelage of you centers on—*context*. It is the context of the Reverend’s motives that sets them apart from mine.”

“The context that you’re a mafia don who only cares for money and he’s a religious leader with actual principles?”

“And how did you deduce that? Because he spouts moral platitudes, unlike myself, who spouts none?”

“But he definitely believes what he says. About fighting evil and... and all of it. Mike wasn’t lying about that. Everyone knows the Reverend is driven by what he feels is right or wrong.”

“A deluded tyrant is still a tyrant, Mr. Parker.”

“And you’re a non-deluded tyrant?”

Pedro smiled—a devilish, quicksilver smile. “Why, if that isn’t the nicest praise I’ve ever received.”

“It wasn’t praise.”

“No?” Pedro tsked. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“No, I couldn’t have.” Peter looked at Pedro seriously. “And you know that. You know I could never fool you. That’s why I’m here now, why you’re even tolerating me in your presence. Because you believe you know my motivations, and that gives you power over me. Otherwise, I’d be lying

dead somewhere, because you'd destroy any weapon you couldn't control to prevent it from falling into the hands of your enemies."

"My, my. Have you been reading Machiavelli, little cherub?"

"I prefer Tsun Zu, personally."

Pedro laughed. Just outright *laughed*, a real, unrestrained laugh that shocked Peter to hear it. "What you grasp in theory you lack in application, my friend."

"F-friend?" Wasn't Pedro ready to kill him just thirty minutes ago, when he threw Peter against a bookshelf? And Peter thought Wade was mercurial.

"You didn't buckle to me. You didn't surrender. You should have, but you didn't."

It began to dawn on Peter that Pedro's prior display of 'temper' may have been a test. Or at least partially a test. "And that makes me... an equal instead of a minion?"

"Oh, you're still a minion. Just a minion I hold in high regard."

"Dude, for all that you're surrounded by books, you oughta look up the definition of 'friend' in the dictionary. Because you've got it all wrong."

"Have I?" Pedro hummed noncommittally.

"Listen, if you're pulling some 'keep your friends close but your enemies closer' shit on me, I swear I'll—"

"You'll what?" Pedro asked indulgently, a genuinely curious glitter in his eyes.

“I’ll—I’ll peacefully protest the crap out of you, fucker, just you wait.”

Pedro laughed again. When he held his hand out for Peter to shake, the slyness and the coolness in his gaze was back, but a fraction of a degree warmer than before. Peter wondered which was the mask—this, or the rage he’d seen Pedro display just earlier. “A pleasure, as always, Peter,” Pedro said, releasing Peter’s hand after a perfectly reasonable, perfectly formal duration.

It wasn’t until Peter had left the library that he realized Pedro had begun calling him by his first name.

That was progress in the right direction, wasn’t it?

But then, what was the twist of unease in Peter’s stomach?

Chapter 19

“Are... Are you telling me you’ve been faking it? All this while? That you’ve been faking it for me, being the

gentleman, all kisses and hugs?”

“No. That’s me, too.”

“That’s what I’m saying! That’s who you really are—”

“This is who I am.”

“It’s not who you are. It’s who you let yourself become. And who you can stop yourself from becoming again.”

“Peter. Peter, it’s been me all along. I can’t bear to hurt you, but I... I’ve been good, haven’t I? I’m *being* good. But you can’t just fix the system with non-violent solutions like softening up hardened criminals with more cell-phone conversations with their families. That won’t work on everyone. There are some people that need to get beaten to stop them from doing evil shit. That’s just the way it is. Playing nice just won’t work on some assholes. You can’t talk ‘em out of being Nazis or pedophiles or abusers. You can’t reform them. You just have to kick their asses until they’re too scared to do the things they *wanna* do.” Then, Wade laughed. Raggedly. “Oh, who am I kidding? You have me on a collar, Pete, and I’d do anything for you. Anything. Including cutting my own arms off so I don’t do anything you’ll hate me for.”

“That’s...” Peter swallowed. “That’s a little extreme.”

“Ya think? That’s *me*, Peter. I’m extreme.” Wade shook his head. “Just like you gotta do something, I gotta do something. I can’t just... float through prison life like some kinda ghost. I have to take action. I have to do the right thing. I’m a grown man with—”

“Needs?” Peter finished for him, skeptically. “Needs that involve you pulverizing child abusers?”

"Yes?"

"Don't answer my question with a question, Wade."

"Damn, you're a hardass." Wade paused. "I love it."

"I know," Peter said sweetly. Then, he grew stern. "But these people you plan to pulverize? They're already paying for their crimes. Just being in prison is them paying for their crimes. You don't have to—"

"But I do." Wade gesticulated at their cell door, as if beyond it waited every demon in hell. He wasn't wrong. "What about the pedophile I punished before you arrived? He raped a girl to death, Peter. A nine-year-old girl. Are you gonna tell me that a prison sentence is enough punishment for him? Are you? Because if you are, go ahead."

Peter couldn't say anything.

"Exactly."

[scene skip]

"Just because you've done one thing—or two things, or ten things—doesn't suddenly mean you're okay with everything. There's no such thing as a blank check when it comes to consent; it's something that matters at every step, so you can be sure you're ready for it. There's no rush, Petey. We have years to—"

"Years?" Peter pinched the bridge of his nose. "At this rate, I'll be a virgin forever."

"You won't be in jail forever."

"Are you hoping someone else will rid me of my virginity? Because you think you're undeserving of me or some crap like that? Well, I don't wanna wait until I'm out of jail. I wanna lose my virginity here. Now. With you."

Wade swallowed. "You're cruel, Peter," he whispered. "The things you do to me..."

"And oh, the things you *don't* do to me." Peter scowled. "I'm ready. I promise. Go ahead."

"Go ahead? What are you, a traffic inspector?"

"Better than a cock-blocker."

[scene skip]

Wade groaned. "Now that's a pretty mouth. Been rememberin' how it felt to kiss. To *fuck*. With my tongue."

Peter gasped.

"You told me to be honest," Wade said. "You told me to tell you what I was thinking. You told me to be myself. Are you regretting it?"

"No," Peter said faintly. "But if you don't lemme get my clothes off soon, my *pants* will be regretting it."

"If you ever wanna stop, just tell me you wanna stop. And I'll stop. Even if it's two seconds before an orgasm."

“Wow. That’s a recipe for blue balls, right there.”

“Pete.” Wade took Peter’s face in his hands and looked at him soberly. “I mean it. I’ll stop. You have to understand that. Do you understand that?”

“I’ve been trying to get you to *start* for so long, you think I’m gonna let you stop?”

“Peter—”

“All right, all right. I understand. If I feel uncomfortable with anything, I’ll tell you to stop.”

“Good.” Wade let go. “Now, let’s get your clothes off.”

“Yes, please!” Peter practically hopped up from the bunk and ripped his pants off. He felt like one of those heroines in dime-store, bodice-ripping romance novels, except he was ripping his own bodice off.

“Peter.” Wade sighed. “Slow down.”

“But—”

“Let me take off your shirt.”

That... Peter couldn’t really complain about that. He gulped. “Okay.”

[scene skip]

Then, when Peter was naked, Wade stroked the sole of Peter’s foot.

The touch shot through Peter like a current. He snatched his foot back, laughing. It was a breathless laugh, though, an incriminating laugh. And he knew it. “Wh-what the hell was that?”

“Touch. You asked for touch. I’m giving it to you.” Wade’s voice was darker, somehow, scary and solid and focused. His fingers sought Peter out and traced the sole of his foot again, over and over, from the toe to the heel, until Peter was struggling not to pull away like he had the first time. Hot little sparks of sensation arced through him, along with a sense that this was different from the usual. This wasn’t gentleness. This wasn’t Wade being kind to him, being considerate of him.

This was Wade trying to take him *apart*. And maybe it was perverse, that Wade wore an expression less suited to a lover and more suited to a professional torturer—with the same stark, single-minded intensity—and maybe it was foolish that something within Peter thrilled at that, at the prospect of Wade finally losing his composure, of Wade doing this for himself, for his own pleasure. Light as Wade’s touch was, there was no generosity in it. There was only intent. Peter was being claimed, millimeter by millimeter, and it was unbearable.

When Wade’s rough, callused thumb skated across the arch of Peter’s foot, Peter gasped. It was—it was too much, and it made him feel so *naked*, in ways that went beyond the skin. He couldn’t tolerate it anymore. He just couldn’t. His leg quivered with his need to yank it back, to remove himself from Wade’s reach, from Wade’s strangely exposing touch.

“Wade,” he said waveringly. “I—I think that’s a little too much, don’t you think?”

"This is too much for you?" Wade tilted his head, his eyes narrow. "I haven't even touched you anywhere else. If you can't take this, Peter, then what can you take?"

The bastard. So this had been a test all along, a Kobayashi Maru scenario designed for Peter to fail, proving to Peter that he wasn't prepared for sex. That he couldn't tolerate it.

That it scared him.

And it did.

He wasn't accustomed to seeing Wade like this, implacable and immovable, every trace of tenderness gone from his features, which were harsh and set and predatory. It was like a mask had been removed. Or perhaps this was the mask, and Wade was just wearing it to teach Peter how new he was to sex, and how slow he should be taking this.

That had to be it. That, and Wade was mentally preparing Peter for having sex with who Wade really was—not only the tender Wade that Peter was accustomed to, but the far more intimidating Deadpool. Perhaps the Wade that Peter was seeing today was a combination of the two and was therefore closer to who Wade really was. Wade was introducing Peter to himself as much as he was introducing Peter to Peter's boundaries. Hell, Wade was making sure *he himself* wasn't one of Peter's boundaries.

Gathering what was left of his courage, Peter said, "You're—you're trying to put me off, Wade. You're trying to discourage me. It won't work."

"Won't it?" Wade cupped Peter's heel, and then slid his grasp upward, to Peter's ankle, which he again circled with his thumb, so glancingly that it barely qualified as contact.

Peter jumped; he'd had no idea that even his ankle could be that sensitive.

Wade smiled, and it was a dark smile, wholly unfamiliar. "Frightening, isn't it? Having your body awoken like this? Being made to realize how much you can *feel*? How sharp it is, like a knife cutting you open, leaving you bare?"

Peter shivered.

So there were more things to be stripped of than clothing; there were more ways to be naked than simply being unclothed. That was what Wade was trying to tell him. This was Wade's version of a warning.

And Peter knew, instinctively, that Wade would go no further until Peter heeded it. Until he heard that warning; until he learned his lesson; until he went into this with his eyes wide open, or chose not to proceed at all.

Wade wanted his consent. Not just a verbal "yes," permission given without any understanding of the consequences, but a true knowing, a true respect for the dangers that came with surrendering oneself, and the conscious agreement to go ahead in spite of that.

Or because of it.

No blank checks. Peter had to know exactly what he was signing off on. And Wade was letting him know. There was no small print. There was no doubt. There was only trust—Wade, trusting Peter with who he truly was, and Peter, trusting Wade with himself.

So Peter relaxed, unfurled, and met Wade's eyes again. "Do it," he said, even as his heartbeat sped up. "Cut me open. Leave me bare."

Wade groaned. "God, you're—" What Wade said next was muffled as he abruptly bent to kiss Peter, but it sounded a lot like, "perfect."

Peter flushed. A molten, devastating flush, that soaked into his flesh and had him abruptly sweating. His skin was growing as damp as if Wade had been touching it for hours. God, Peter *wanted* him to touch it for hours. And all because of a bit of praise. Maybe he did have a praise kink, after all.

Wade broke their kiss, sitting back up between Peter's knees and continuing the inexorable journey of his hand along Peter's body. Wade trailed his fingers up Peter's waist and then down his arm, stroking the palm before moving back up again to caress Peter's clavicles. Peter had already begun panting, but Wade's breaths were deep and steady, like he was meditating. His eyes were fixed on Peter and his concentration was absolute.

Perhaps this was the face Wade's victims saw.

Peter shuddered. Contrary as it seemed, it was so good to have Wade like this, to know this part of him, too. It felt like honesty. It felt like depth. It felt like a connection between them, taut and vibrating with tension as it was.

Peter's panting became shallow as Wade explored him. He was utterly at Wade's mercy, touched not how he needed to be touched but how Wade needed to touch him. It was like... It was like Peter existed only for Wade, offering himself up for Wade to use however Wade wished. Peter felt like a *slut*, put on display for an indifferent master and craving any kind of leniency, anything at all, willing to beg for it if he had to. His yearning was a shard buried in him, a

sliver of glass just beneath his skin, slicing him open from the inside.

“Please,” Peter begged. “Please, Wade, I gotta come,” but no matter how often he repeated it, Wade didn’t listen to him. And Wade wouldn’t, Peter realized, unless Peter asked him to stop.

Except Peter didn’t want him to.

Peter looked down at himself, at his own cock ruddy and engorged with blood, so swollen that it bobbed above his belly, twitching, a thread of pre-ejaculate connecting it to his skin. The thread glistened, coalescing into a heavy bead of pre-come that finally dripped from his cock, severing the connection and splattering onto his skin. It was as hot as candle-wax. Peter sobbed, his stomach muscles quivering.

He couldn’t hide what this was doing to him. He didn’t want to. He only wanted to give Wade what Wade was seeking—every response Peter’s body was capable of. Peter wasn’t going to ask Wade to stop. As for Wade... Wade was in some sort of trance, although his once-steady breaths had become labored and his pupils were blown.

Finally, *finally*, Wade’s hand reached Peter’s cock. But it took the scenic route there. That broad, callused palm skimmed down Peter’s torso, a lingering tease, a maddening torment perpetually promising to go where Peter needed it to go and simultaneously failing to deliver on that promise. The downward path of Wade’s hand took many frustrating detours, pausing to thumb idly at Peter’s nipples, flicking at them until Peter was writhing, and then dipping briefly into the hollows above Peter’s hipbones before—mercifully, *wondrously*—wrapping around Peter’s cock.

Peter hips snapped upward with a violent lunge that was beyond his control. It was sheer instinct; Peter couldn't help it any more than he could help the hammering of his heart or the incessant trembling of his thighs.

And yet, even though it wasn't Peter's fault, Wade punished Peter for it. Of course he did.

Immediately, Wade's hand withdrew, and when Peter moaned in complaint, it only returned one finger at a time. No, one *fingertip* at a time, grazing the length of Peter's cock lightly, from the root to the crown, stopping only to smear Peter's pre-ejaculate over the excruciatingly sensitive glans before resuming. Wade's grasp grew more solid, more palpable as more of his fingers encircled Peter's erection, the warm clasp of his palm giving Peter mere moments of sweet relief before withdrawing again.

Because every time Peter reacted, his hips flexing and juddering, Wade punished him by going back to fingertips only. Every time Peter thrust up, the hold that Wade had been solidifying on Peter's cock faded away into near-nothingness. Every time Peter was about to hurtle over the edge, Wade would drag him back.

Peter didn't even know what was happening. His mind was breaking. He was delirious with need, a constant stream of "ah, ah, ah" emerging from his slack, spit-sheened lips. Sweat trickled down his forehead and got into his eyes, making them sting, blurring his vision. His head lolled on the pillow, and his sight caught on strange, tilting snatches of the ceiling, of the bunk above him, of the desk in the corner of the cell. The world whirled around him, impervious to his agony, and whenever Peter made the mistake of looking down at Wade's hand on him, he ended up thrusting again, and then it was back to square one.

Eventually, Peter became aware of a rasping noise in the distance, a noise that he vaguely identified as his own breathing, sawing in and out of his lungs. His legs had fallen open. His arms were lying limp by his sides, his hands no longer fisting the sheets because he simply didn't have the energy for that. He couldn't manage much more than to just lie there and *take* it, take Wade's endless, merciless touch. Peter's cock was so over-stimulated that it throbbed in time with his pulse, that it burned like a salted wound, that it leaked and leaked until Wade's knuckles were a slippery mess, and Peter's upper thighs and lower abdomen were coated in streaks of pre-come that caught the light and glimmered.

Wade gazed at that glimmer as if caught in a spell, as if he wasn't even conscious of what he was doing to Peter, of how much Peter ached, being this close to coming but not being allowed to come. It was like Wade was making Peter wait as punishment for *Wade* having to wait. But this was Wade taking, too, like Peter had wanted him to, so Peter gave and gave to him. Peter gave Wade his total submission, his hiccupping sobs and quaking thighs, and the tremors that shook him in irregular, involuntary spasms. Wade wrung every possible reaction from him and Peter yielded to him, helpless not to, helpless to that look in Wade's eyes, like Wade was in a dream.

"You've stopped asking to come," Wade murmured dazedly, drunkenly, still palming Peter's cock. "Peter, do you want—"

Peter whimpered. Wade's grip squelched loudly as Peter grew wetter and wetter. Wade's fingernails skidded across the vein under Peter's erection, likely harder than Wade intended because of how slippery it had all become.

It was those nails that did it, that unexpected and frightening pressure, that threat of almost too much—

And suddenly, Peter was coming, without Wade even picking up the tempo. Thick ropes of semen striped Peter's stomach and chest in wracking, almost painful surges, and Peter couldn't even scream, his body convulsing silently as his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Oh, *fuck*." Wade sounded wrecked. "Fuck, Peter—"

But Peter just kept coming, his climax stretching on and on, waves of brilliant white and orange rising and crashing behind his closed eyelids. He gulped in air in ragged heaves, like a man who'd been saved from drowning and lay, half-conscious, on the shore.

He was nothing. He'd been reduced to nothing. There was no shape to him anymore, no identity, just sweat and skin and the trembling, lustrous aftermath of a bliss so profound that it robbed him of speech. His thighs were gummy with drying semen, and his face was sticky with drying tears.

Wade was staring down at him, awestruck, like he'd never seen Peter before.

Eventually, Peter regained enough cognizance to notice that Wade was still aroused.

"Y-you haven't come." Peter's voice was wasn't so much a voice as a whisper, hoarse with all the begging he'd done before he'd given up on begging altogether. He tugged at Wade feebly, urging Wade upward until he was straddling Peter's shoulders. Wade cooperated with him, still looking stunned, even though Peter's arms were too lax with afterglow for him to exert any strength. "You can do it. You can come. On my chest. On my f-face—"

Wade cursed. He fumbled with his pants, pulling out his prick and jacking off, right there above Peter, where Peter could see it—where Peter could see every stroke and hear every slick, filthy sound, see every spurt of pearl-white pre-come welling from the dark, purplish tip. The tendons in Wade's corded forearms stood out as his strokes quickened, and, god, Wade was *working* his cock, brutal and relentless, showing himself no mercy.

Wade met Peter's eyes, jolted in shock, and then stopped looking at Peter altogether, as if he couldn't handle it. He threw his head back, his Adam's apple bobbing. Sweat shone on his temples. He twisted his wrist cruelly at the head of his cock, again and again, forcing more thick, viscous fluid to seep from the slit.

Peter's mouth flooded with saliva. He hadn't tasted Wade, yet. He hadn't sucked Wade off. But, damn, how he wanted to. He leaned up, straining, until his tongue *just* brushed Wade's cock.

Wade came with a low grunt, like he'd been gutted. His release splashed onto Peter's jaw and chest, just as Peter had asked—and it was Peter's turn to grunt, his softening cock giving another twitch.

Wade fell atop him, kissing him, sliding his hot, open mouth across Peter's chin and down his neck to his collarbones, and finally dragging the flat of his tongue over the semen on Peter's pecs.

Wade was licking him clean.

Peter mewled, his nipples standing stiff as Wade swiped his tongue over them with thorough, repetitive swipes, until Peter was squirming.

“Stop,” Peter gasped, over-sensitized. “Wade, stop...”

And Wade did, pulling away, his lips glossy with come and spit. Impossibly, unbearably, Peter was half-hard again.

“Please don’t make me come again,” Peter pleaded tremulously. “Please. I—I can’t—it’ll hurt—”

“Hush,” said Wade soothingly, kissing Peter once more and sharing the taste of Peter’s own come.

Peter whined.

“Won’t hurt you,” Wade slurred, sounding as lost as Peter was feeling. “Never hurt you. Peter...”

Wade’s natural tenderness, withheld from Peter for so long, caused Peter’s innermost walls to crumble. For no reason that he could comprehend, he began shaking. His teeth actually chattered. It was like he was going into withdrawal, or a comedown after a high, like he was sore and exhausted on the inside, worn down to his very last reserves. He was blissed out, but tired. So very tired. His body couldn’t even hold itself together anymore. It was falling apart, acting like it had hypothermia, even though he was soaking the sheets beneath him with perspiration.

Wade instantly gathered Peter up, warming Peter by vigorously rubbing Peter’s arms, and then running his palms up and down Peter’s back, firmly, repetitively, until Peter began to calm.

Peter clung to Wade, mind still spinning. It was as though he’d outpaced himself in a marathon, as impossible as that scenario was, and was only just catching up to himself. It wasn’t so much about what Wade had done to him as it was

about where Peter had gone within himself, and how far the swim back to the surface was, how exhausting.

It did feel like surfacing. Surfacing back into time, into reality, into normalcy. Peter's brain started to switch itself back on, one switch at a time, the circuits flickering back to life. As Peter's ability to decode language came back online, he realized that Wade was speaking to him—*had* been speaking to him, in a continuous, comforting rumble.

"Hey," Wade was murmuring, "hey. Peter. You'll be all right. You did great. You did so well. You were amazing."

The praise helped. A lot. Wade's words fell gently upon Peter, like a warm rain, sinking into him and making him glow from within. It was a deeper glow than the afterglow, somehow. Deeper and brighter. Under the onslaught of that warmth, Peter's inexplicable chills retreated, and that delicious, post-orgasm lassitude returned.

"I'm..." Peter croaked hazily. "I'm back? I think?"

Wade hummed, still rubbing Peter's arms. "Tell me when you *know* you're back. Until then, just rest. I'm here. I'm here for you."

So Peter rested, drifting half-awake and soaking up Wade's presence, Wade's nearness, and the fact that Wade thought he was amazing. He felt a lot like a cat curled up on an owner's lap, getting petted to his heart's content. If he had a purr-box, he'd be purring.

At least, that was what he was contemplating doing until it occurred to him that Wade was—

"You're cuddling me," Peter accused him, because Wade still tended to resist Peter's cuddles. How unfair.

"Yeah, I'm cuddling you. And the fact that you're sassing me means you really are back. Are you back?"

"If you know, then why're you asking me?"

"Yep, you're definitely back. But you need to tell me. Use your words, Peter."

"I'm back. I am." Peter wiggled his toes, as if checking that he'd regained control of his extremities. "That was weird. The shaking and the... whatever was going on there."

"Was it a good weird," Wade asked cautiously, "or a bad weird?"

"Good weird," Peter decided, because honestly, that was the best goddamn experience of his entire *existence*, and Peter wasn't about to deny it. Even if he did sort of go into withdrawal for a while, there. "Awesome weird. *Incredible* weird."

"Okay, okay. I get it." Wade was grinning.

"I mean it. As for the shaking... I guess it's only logical to go into withdrawal after having the most intense high ever."

"It's termed a drop. When that happens. I—I should've warned you. Heck, I should've remembered that it was a thing that could even happen. I didn't realize what it would do to you until after. Until you went under." Wade lifted a hand to cup Peter's face, Wade's eyes soft and full of wonder. "And you went under so beautifully."

Peter blushed. "You have got to stop praising me, dude. Or I'll pop another boner and we'll be stuck in some kind of eternal cycle of orgasms and withdrawals. Not that I'm

complaining. But I'm pretty sure the prison timetable won't allow us to just lie around in bed all day, fucking like newlyweds."

Wade's grin widened. "You can say 'fuck' now."

"Yes, I can say 'fuck' now. If I can do it, I can say it." Peter grinned back. "And *you're* not denying we're newlyweds."

It was Wade's turn to blush. "Um, I..."

"Nah, don't even bother denying it. That? What you just did to me? That was the best wedding vow ever. And it was just a handjob. If that's what handjobs with you are like, what'll everything else be like?"

"Everything..." Wade's mind clearly went to the gutter for a second, before he remembered himself. "Peter. Stop trying to incept me with perverted ideas."

"But you were already a pervert."

"True," Wade admitted. Then, his grin vanished, and he added, "I'm—I'm sorry I acted like that. Like Deadpool. I'm sorry I let you see me like that—"

"No," Peter chuckled weakly. "I... I got off on that."

Wade frowned in disbelief. "You got off on me being terrifying?"

"Don't you get off on *me* being terrifying? You talk about it an awful lot."

"Touché," Wade said.

And he was smiling.

Not his executioner's smile, or whatever that smile had been, back then. This was Wade's smile, soft and real and fond, and Peter couldn't help smiling back at him.

"So," Peter said cheekily, "are we in the clear to have sex regularly from now on?"

Wade shrugged. "Well, I guess it's about time for our mutually assured dickstruction."

Peter choked on a laugh. "Wade!"

"I'm still gonna pace it, though. We're not gonna start bonin' all over the place like horny bunnies. You still have boundaries you have no clue about, and I have no intention of crossing them. Which, er, about that? We may have to come up with a safeword."

"A..." Peter blinked. "Isn't that for, like, really hardcore stuff?"

"Technically, what I did to you today was 'hardcore.' It's called edging."

"Is that what it was? I just thought it was a particularly mean way of jacking someone off."

"That's... also an accurate description."

"Well, it was *hell*."

Wade smirked. "But you loved it."

"So did you. Sadist."

"That's my point." Wade bopped Peter gently on the nose, which was too adorable a thing to do in this context. "You need a safeword."

"I'll think about it." Peter tipped his chin up to kiss the finger Wade had bopped his nose with. "Should conversations about safewords be so, I dunno, cute?"

"If they aren't, then those conversations shouldn't be happening at all."

"Well, thank you for your lecture on Edging 101, Professor Wilson."

Wade buried his reddening face in Peter's shoulders. "Pete. Don't put fantasies in my head that weren't already there."

"Aw." Peter pouted. "You didn't fantasize about being my professor? About me calling you 'sir'?"

"Peter." Wade nipped his ear vengefully. "Go the hell to sleep."

"Or what?"

"Or you'll need that safeword a lot sooner than you expected."

"Why, will you spank me for being naughty? Professor?"

"*Peter.*" Wade crushed Peter to him in a rib-creakingly tight embrace, as if he could hug Peter into immobility. Which, given how muscular Wade was, he could. "Go. To. Sleep."

Peter huffed. Fine, if Wade wanted to be that way. Peter nestled against Wade, slung a leg across Wade's hip, and settled down for the night. "Sweet dreams, Professor. *I'll* be dreaming about safewords."

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

A series of Pedro scenes, in order, up to the end of the story. It briefly covers what happens re: Wade's and Peter's happy ending, as well.

Again, as I will be deleting this story in about 2 weeks, I won't have the time to complete the story and place each of these scenes in a larger narrative. Instead, for Pedro fans, here's a compilation of Pedro scenes that I *have* written about our favorite mob boss!

For those of you wondering how I see the Wade/Peter dynamic vs. the Pedro/Peter dynamic, here's how:

Peter: *is sweet and innocent*

Wade: OMG CINNAMON ROLL TOO SWEET FOR THIS WORLD, TOO PURE

Pedro: Then goddamn well MAKE him less pure, you fool!

Pedro: It can't be good for Peter that he's too pure for the world he's stuck in! He won't survive it!

Wade: Peter's fine just the way he is! I'm not going to ruin who he is in the name of protecting who he is! That doesn't even make any sense!

Pedro: So you'd rather he died for your ridiculous ideals of purity? A live cinnamon roll is better than a dead cinnamon roll, you ignoramus!

Wade: JUST KEEP YOUR CORRUPTING, EVIL WAYS
TO YOURSELF, YOU VILLAIN

Pedro: I'm not even a real villain at this point! I'm
more like an anti-villain!

Peter: Uh, guys? Could we, um, get back to the story
now?

Pedro and Wade, glaring at each other: NO

[scene skip]

Pedro set aside the novel he was reading. "I am simply
cultivating you."

"Gee, thanks for making me sound like a plant."

"A crop," Pedro corrected. "There is a difference."

"And what is that difference?"

"A plant is merely a plant; it could be an insignificant weed,
growing untended by the sidewalk. A crop is valuable, and
has been well-tended to produce a bountiful harvest."

"Bootyful harvest, you mean. That's the only harvest the
guys in this prison want to reap from me."

Pedro looked him directly in the eyes. "Not I."

Peter swallowed, suddenly nervous. Pedro hadn't said he
didn't want to fuck Peter all at, only that it wasn't the *only*

thing he wanted from him. Peter tried not to feel like this was the small text next to an asterisk in a complicated legal contract designed specifically to befuddle him. “Not you.”

[scene skip]

“So, why exactly do you respect me?

After a pause, Pedro said, “I respect a man with a cause.”

“I’m not a man with a cause. I’m a rebel *without* a cause.”

“You are mistaking yourself with Deadpool.”

“Oh, trust me, he has a cause. Multiple causes. He’s a goddamn dictionary of causes.”

“Causes for which he kills people?”

“Er, yeah.”

“And you’re all right with that?”

“It isn’t a matter of being *all right* with—”

“Yes, it is. It’s a key incompatibility. If you weren’t in prison, would you still approve of his actions? Because he would certainly continue to kill, were he released. It’s his addiction. Could you tolerate it? Vouch for it?”

Peter’s heart sank. He did have philosophical differences with Wade, to put it mildly, but he didn’t like thinking about them. Wade’s murderous impulses were mostly contained in prison, even if there were exceptions, like the Nazi

incident. But Pedro was right—what if they weren't? Would Wade's love for Peter be enough of a deterrent, enough of a reason for Wade to stop killing?

Or would Peter have to stop loving him first?

Damn it, Pedro was just stirring trouble, just as the Reverend had said he would. Peter couldn't decide who to trust—a religious fanatic or a mafia don. This was what his life had become.

[scene skip]

Tweedledum grabbed Peter by the shoulder. "Listen here, you little twerp—"

Pedro struck Tweedledum in the face, backhanding him so hard that Tweedledum's head snapped sideways and crashed against the bookshelf near him, sending a single bloody tooth flying into the air.

"Did I give you permission to touch him?" Pedro growled, as Tweedledum crumpled to the floor.

"Wait!" Peter interceded, appalled, but Pedro held up a hand to silence him.

"*Did I?*" Pedro asked again, his icy gaze fixed on Tweedledum. "Answer me, lieutenant."

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Tweedledum was Pedro's lieutenant. Pedro was publicly disciplining his lieutenant, one of his most trusted men, because of Peter.

This was some next level shit, and Peter didn't like it. He didn't like being manhandled by Tweedledum, either, but causing unrest in the ranks—specifically, in the ranks of an ally—couldn't be a good idea. Peter had never been a home-wrecker, and he wasn't gonna start now.

But Tweedledum just looked up at Pedro with childlike devotion in his small, mean, squinty eyes and rasped, "No, sir." There was blood trickling from his split lip, and a truly impressive bruise forming on his jaw, where Pedro had hit him. "I'm sorry, sir."

Peter cringed on Tweedledum's behalf, which was bizarre and also not anything he'd ever, ever thought he'd do. "Please stop," he croaked at Pedro.

But Pedro ignored him. "Let it be known," Pedro said coldly, placing a hand on Peter's shoulder—and the significance of the gesture wasn't lost on Peter, that Pedro was reserving non-violent contact for him after unleashing violence on one of his own followers. It marked Peter as a person of prestige. Some really fucking weird prestige that Peter didn't entirely understand. "Anyone else who lays a hand on Peter Parker from now on, for any reason other than to protect him, will have that hand cut off. By me. Personally. Is that clear?"

A low murmur of assent ran through the ranks, accompanied by sheepish nodding from everyone, including the still-bleeding Tweedledum.

Pedro leaned down and extended his hand to the prone Tweedledum, who took it with adoration and relief in his eyes. Once Pedro had helped the giant up, he felt gently along Tweedledum's injured jaw and said, as warmly as if

he were the most gracious, forgiving saint ever, “Go to the infirmary and get that seen to.”

“Yes, sir,” said Tweedledum gratefully, and scampered off. How a man of Tweedledum’s gargantuan proportions could scamper like a mouse was beyond Peter. It was a timely reminder of just how terrifying Pedro was.

“Dude,” said Peter to Pedro, “you can’t act all knight in shining armor *with the same person* whose tooth you just knocked out. That’s messed up, man.”

Pedro waved dismissively, and the rest of his goons disbanded, leaving the library in a hurry. “It’s the carrot and the stick.”

“Nope. It’s the asshole and the dick.”

Pedro raised an eyebrow.

“Not literally! Augh, I did *not* need to picture Tweedledum getting sodomized by the boss he clearly worships—just not, please, god, on his knees. Hand me the nearest bottle of brain-bleach.”

“Tweedledum?” Pedro asked, amused.

“My nickname for him.”

“And, let me guess, Tweedledee for his brother? The names suit them. Perhaps I’ll make them their official designations.”

Peter groaned. “Please don’t.” The last thing Peter needed was to be the inventor of mafia nicknames. He was already breaking the law as it was.

It had been shocking to see the sophisticated Pedro commit violence with as much ease as Wade. In some ways, it was even more shocking than Wade's violence, because for Wade it was a part of his hotblooded nature, whereas for Pedro his violence ran cold rather than hot, premeditated and deliberate and therefore somehow even more brutal.

Pedro had categorically chosen to unleash that brutality against one of his own, and he'd done it for Peter. It had seemed instantaneous, even reflexive, but Peter knew better. At some point, long before this event had even played out, Pedro had foreseen that a similar situation may occur and had decided to deal with it in this manner—with inexorable, ruthless force.

The fact that Pedro had been *thinking* about Peter, and about how to best protect Peter from Pedro's own men, gave Peter the shivers. To have Pedro's powerful, precise machine of a mind factoring Peter into its endless equations—and prioritizing Peter above almost everything else—was intimidating in a way Wade's focus on him never was.

Pedro's protectiveness was strange and possessive and yet completely different from Wade's brand of strangeness and possessiveness. There was nothing accidental about Pedro's protectiveness; it was a choice. It wasn't anything as irresponsible as fate; Pedro would probably laugh at the very concept of fate.

No, Pedro was a believer in free will. And he was *willing* Peter to be safe, not simply by wishing it, but by planning it, acting on it, and beating anybody who laid a hand on Peter into submission. What made it worse was that the beating wasn't even done out of passion or sentiment, but out of a chilling sort of predetermination.

"I've frightened you," Pedro murmured, his perceptiveness as correct as always. "My apologies."

"Please. You're not apologetic at all. You look smug, you know that?"

"I'm not smug because I frightened you."

"No, you're just smug because you effectively protected me. It's feeding some primal caveman instinct of yours, I can tell."

"Because you live with a primal caveman like Deadpool all the time?"

"No, dickwad. Because you're usually so goddamn good at keeping your instincts under wraps that when they *do* surface, they're glaringly obvious." Peter rolled his eyes. "Wow. So Pedro Corleone is a normal human being, after all. Pedro Corleone is capable of caring about someone other than his grandma."

"Perhaps what I am doing for you isn't caring but strategizing. You are a valuable investment—"

"Yep, the kid who nearly shat his pants when you bitch-slapped the crap outta a man twice your size is *such* a valuable investment."

"I'm not out to recruit you for your bravado. I'm out to recruit you for your smarts." Pedro paused. "And your courage."

"My courage?" Peter said disbelievingly. "Didn't you just comment on my lack of bravado?"

“Bravado is something else. It is to courage what arrogance is to confidence—not the real thing, just a convincing replica. What *you* have, Mr. Parker, is not physical bravado but moral courage, the courage to do what you believe is right even when it will cost you, and cost you dearly.”

“Doesn’t that make me hella dumb, to a criminal mastermind like you?”

“It makes you intriguing. You and Deadpool are the only two men in this prison who aren’t out for themselves.”

“Then why aren’t you recruiting Deadpool?”

“Because he’s too volatile to be dependable. You, on the other hand...” Pedro smiled slowly, somehow both reptilian and faintly warm, like there was affection behind his words, but he wasn’t particularly invested in expressing it. “You’re a good boy.”

Peter flushed. “Don’t call me that.”

“You’re dependable to a fault. You’d die to keep your promises. And if you were to promise allegiance to *me*... Well, Mr. Parker. I would make it worth your while.”

Peter got the distinct impression that Pedro wasn’t talking about money. Peter didn’t want to know what Pedro *was* talking about. Books? Sex? Bandwidth? Tickets to the opera? A lifetime supply of baking products for Aunt May? This entire incident was surreal, like a scene out of Alice in Wonderland, except set in prison.

[skip scene]

[chapter notes >>]

Peter leaves his and Wade's cell urgently upon hearing that Pedro's grandma is ill: "I have to go." Peter rushes to Pedro and offers the phone to call Pedro's grandmother with, but Pedro refuses as it would be a call to the hospital's land line and would likely be tapped by the feds, who would be waiting for Pedro to contact her in some way. Plus, Pedro doesn't want to expose that he has a method of external contact yet; he doesn't want to risk outing Peter and Peter's operation. Not to mention that Pedro's grandma would disapprove of such rank sentimentality, and Pedro knows it: "She'll kill me for risking a valuable asset for mere sentiment." Pedro says he will call her only once she is released from the hospital.

Peter instinctively reaches out to hold Pedro's hand, which Pedro finds *shocking* because nobody touches him that way, and it is only then that he realizes how starved he's been for touch all these years in jail, and possibly even before, when his status as a mafia don kept such touches—such tender, sympathetic, uncomplicated touches—at bay. Just... *human* touches. Simple human contact, simple human warmth. It moves Pedro in deep and unexpected ways, in almost painful ways, like blood flowing back into frostbitten limbs, a warmth that is simultaneously welcome and unwelcome.

They sit there holding hands for a long time, until the knots of tension in Pedro's shoulders come loose.

Pedro is very grateful—in his own, roundabout, Pedro way. He tells Peter how strange it is to be touched like that after so long. Touched only as he recalls being touched in the

dim recesses of his childhood memories. His Abuela hadn't exactly been nurturing, especially when he became old enough to tie his own shoelaces. She insisted he become a "man" ASAP. But before that, she used to be gentle with him. Sometimes. Sometimes, she used to sit with him when he was ill, not reading him stories or giving him toys but just *being* there, knitting quietly on a chair beside his bed, occasionally putting her coarse, gun-callused, wrinkled hand on his forehead to check his temperature. Pedro remembers that fondly.

Pedro tells all this to Peter as a means of connecting with his grandma through his memories, and Peter quietly sits there and listens. Pedro also reveals that his grandma saved his life when his parents were assassinated (see scene directly below).

After this incident, their friendship (increasingly a courtship from Pedro's POV) grows. Peter is regularly invited to play chess or discuss books, and of course for Pedro to call his grandma once she is released from hospital. Pedro has plenty of excuses for summoning Peter.

Peter now understands why Pedro adores his grandma so much; she's the only love Pedro has ever known. Peter becomes more sympathetic and understanding of Pedro.

As for Pedro, he starts liking Peter a lot more after this, much more deeply.

[<< end chapter notes]

[Pedro recounting how his grandmother saved his life when his parents were assassinated:]

"I was only eighteen months old when it happened, but there's security tape footage of the incident. I've watched it

several times. Here's what happened."

Peter sucked in a breath.

"My parents went down in a hail of gunfire. As for my grandmother? She shielded me with her own body. And then she killed all the assassins. All the men that had crept up the balcony, let in by traitors amongst our men. Over the months and years that passed, she tracked down every one of those traitors and gouged out their eyes, their intestines, their beating hearts. She took the burden of vengeance off my shoulders. Thanks to her, I can walk free of that vendetta, that rage. She gave me back my pride in our family, in our name. I would die for her. As she would for me."

"Has it occurred to you that it might just be because you're her only heir?"

Pedro smiled, a cold, heartless smile. "Of course it is. That doesn't make it any less true."

Wow. Was Peter actually feeling *sad* for Pedro? What was the world coming to?

"You pity me," Pedro said disapprovingly.

"Look, you just told me the mafia version of 'Little Boy Lost.' How could I not?"

[scene skip]

"If me 'n' Wade are Chaotic Good, then you're Neutral Evil. Anyway," said Peter, "You should set the Reverend and your grandma up on a date. They'd so be each other's type."

Pedro chuckled. "The Reverend is chaste."

"And your grandma isn't?" Peter shuddered in horror. "No, wait, don't answer that. I don't wanna know."

[scene skip]

"Um," said Peter, "are you—by any chance, are you asexual? Or aromantic? Or both?"

Pedro looked up from the chessboard, his eyebrows raised. He didn't seem offended, which was a plus, but he didn't look forthcoming, either. "Why would you think that?"

"No, er, no offense, I... I just, I have this friend Ned who's ace, and you kinda give off the same vibe, sometimes?"

"What vibe is that?"

"I dunno?" Peter squeaked. Pedro was as impenetrable as ever; Peter couldn't be sure he wasn't offending the man dreadfully and wouldn't be beheaded before he left the library. "You're the only person over twenty that uses my phone and *never* calls a lover, a spouse, whatever. Man or woman. That, and you're not into me even though every other prisoner in here is, and—"

"Do you *want* me to be into you?"

"What? No! No. I just—"

"I don't mind." Pedro's usual brand of cool amusement was rising to the surface. Thank god. He wasn't going to have Peter dick-punched for his intrusive questions. "It's quite flattering that you're obsessing over my love life."

"I'm not *obsessing*, I... I'm just wondering."

Pedro shrugged. "I suppose you're right. I never once fell in love, not in all the years I was free to do so. And now that I'm not free to do so, well, I'm not particularly troubled by it. As for physical desire... I've never felt the need to slake my lust with any of the other prisoners, largely because I have no lust to slake. Love and lust have always seemed like wastes of time to me. Unwelcome distractions, if you will."

"Oh. Er. Yeah."

"Then again," Pedro said with a strangely indulgent smile, "there have been exceptions."

"Really? Wow. So you're demisexual and demiromantic?"

"If you had to classify me, that would be the most apt classification."

Peter nodded along excitedly; it was always great to meet other queer people, like it had been great to meet Ned at their school's Queer Club. "Awesome. Full support from me, by the way. Not that it counts for much. But, er. You do you?"

"I do not, in fact, 'do me.' Masturbation generally strikes me as irrelevant."

Peter winced. "S-Sorry. Didn't mean to imply you were masturbating because of your lack of interest in getting a

partner.”

“Well,” said Pedro off-handedly, “it’s never too late to change one’s habits.”

“Change one’s...” Peter trailed off, horrified by the mental image that accompanied Pedro’s statement. “Okay, I think we’ve gone far enough into this conversation. No offence, dude, but I don’t wanna hear about who you may be changing your masturbatory habits for.”

Pedro smirked. “Jealous?”

“No! What—what’s up with you today?”

“You’re the one who wanted to pry into my sexuality.”

“I’m *sorry*, okay? I just, I figured we were friends, and... and... Don’t friends know this stuff about each other? Normally?”

“Peter. We’re in prison. What about our friendship appears normal to you?”

Peter sighed. “You’re right. We have a friendship based on strategic benefits, hacked phones, an unofficial prison boss mentorship, a bizarre chess rivalry, a love of postmodern literature, and mildly entertaining banter.”

“Only *mildly* entertaining?” Pedro feigned insult. “Why, Peter, does our constant mutual psychoanalysis mean nothing to you?”

“Is this how you get your jollies?” Peter griped. “By making fun of me?”

“Why not? In the absence of being pleased by your beautiful mouth—”

Peter coughed in shock.

“—which, according to my men, is rumored to be exceedingly skilled, since it can tame even Deadpool—”

“I cannot even begin to tell you how inaccurate that description is,” Peter said, who had yet to give Wade a single blowjob. Or give anyone a single blowjob. Unless he counted that time he’d tried to practice going down on a banana he’d stolen from Aunt May’s fruit basket, and even then, it probably didn’t count as more than half a blowjob at best.

“—all I can do is be pleased by... your beautiful mouth.” Pedro leered. “Or rather, by the words it speaks. And, speaking of my favorite words...” Pedro waved at the chessboard, where he had, indeed, made his move. “Checkmate.”

“Bastard.”

[scene skip]

“Pedro wants to mob-marry me!” Peter hissed at Wade. “He wants my sexy hacking skillz! He literally offered me a senior rank in the group if I did their hacking for them. Getting into police records. Altering them. Spying on them. Hacking fucking *bank accounts*. Finding dirt on their enemies. Everything.”

[scene skip]

Pedro hummed. "Farewell, Wildcard."

"I prefer Spider-Man."

"That's everybody else's name for you. This is mine."

There was a weird emphasis on *mine* that Peter didn't exactly want to dwell on, so he back-pedaled out of the library at high speed.

[scene skip]

"You—you just want to get rid of Wade so you can have me!"

"No." Pedro stalked up to him, eyes narrow. "Think about how strategically unsound that would be. If I ever eliminated Deadpool, then you would resent me forever. You would never cooperate with me willingly. You would never be mine." Pedro tilted his head. "Besides, I don't have to eliminate Deadpool. A man that volatile will eliminate himself."

Peter went cold. "You... You could conspire to have him eliminated. Without my knowledge."

"Peter. Have I ever lied to you? In our long acquaintance, not once have I lied to you. Not once have I disrespected

you by lying to you. And even if I did, you would find out. Finding things out is your specialty, the very talent for which I wish to recruit you. If I had Deadpool killed, do you honestly imagine that you could join my organization and not uncover the truth? What I want is a lifelong alliance with you, Peter. An alliance like that can only be built on trust."

"My relationship with *Wade* is built on trust."

"Is it? You cannot even trust him to keep himself alive."

Peter drew in a sharp breath. It was as if he'd been struck by an arrow, poison-tipped and sharp, and it was snapping the bones of his ribcage with icy, splintering cracks. "I'm leaving."

Pedro stepped back to give him space. "Then leave. I know that you will return, Peter. You will have no choice but to. When Deadpool fails you, and the Reverend fails you, and the government fails you, I will be the only one who remains."

It sounded like a prophecy, a pronouncement of death as final as the ringing thud of a guillotine.

Peter walked out before he fell to his knees.

[scene skip]

[This is the scene just before the ending. Wade escapes first when he and the other survivors of Project Rebirth are taken out of the prison. He fakes

his own death to get away from the project. Peter mourns for a short while before Dopinder tells him that he's found out, "through the grapevine" wink-wink nudge-nudge, that Wade is in fact alive and in hiding, and is waiting for Peter to get out. There are still 6 years left on Peter's sentence, though, so Pedro conspires to shorten it for Peter's sake. Pedro organizes for a guard's life to be saved by Peter to shorten his sentence and get him released:]

"P-Pedro? How did you get here? I thought the guards didn't let anyone beyond this point that wasn't getting released." Then, it dawned on Peter. "Oh. *Oh*. It was you, wasn't it? You set up the thing with Yaxley getting attacked and me having to give him first aid."

Pedro stepped in and carefully reached for Peter's face, which he cupped in his hand. He gazed into Peter's eyes with a strange, subtle agony, one that did not animate his face so much as fix it in an expression of bittersweet loss. He leaned in to kiss Peter on the mouth, lightly, lingeringly, before stepping away.

"Go," he whispered. "And forgive me this last liberty. I was not unselfish enough to let you go without claiming a reward, without informing you that it was I who did this for you. It was I." Pedro laughed bitterly. "And now you will leave me, as I know you must."

Peter didn't know what to say. "I... I don't know how to pay you back for this."

"You owe me nothing." Pedro said it with a sudden fierceness, a passion that Peter had never seen in him before. "*Nothing*. Do not seek to repay that which was freely given."

Freely given? Peter knew, after all his time in jail, that the only thing that was freely given was love. And Pedro was— Pedro was—

Pedro was walking away. His back was to Peter when he murmured, “Goodbye.” Peter couldn’t see his face, couldn’t see what Pedro looked like when he said that, and he got the feeling that it was because Pedro couldn’t stand to show anyone what he looked like, just then. His voice was low, hoarse, jagged, as if it were encrusted with shards of glass.

And then, Pedro was gone.

Peter stared after him. There was a heavy weight on Peter’s chest, the crushing knowledge that he had lost one of his truest friends. He would be on the outside, now, while Pedro served out the remainder of a fifteen-year sentence, and even when Pedro got out, Peter somehow knew that Pedro’s own code of honor would prevent him from ever seeking Peter out again.

Because Peter would be better off without him. Because Peter would be safer without the dubious friendship of a mafia don.

Who’d hold Pedro’s hand when his grandma got sick, next time? When she died?

Tears stung Peter’s eyes. He wiped at them with his forearm, frustrated with himself, with his own helplessness, his own uselessness. His freedom was Pedro’s gift to him, and he couldn’t even give anything back. He would never be able to give anything back. He’d never get the chance.

Scrubbing vigorously at his wet eyes, Peter clenched his jaw and turned toward the exit. Toward the door that would

lead him out of prison forever. He should be happy. He *was* happy. Somewhere out there, Wade was waiting. Somewhere out there, Wade was free.

And now, Peter would be free with him.

Finally, Peter's mouth curled into a tremulous smile. He told himself he was being happy for Pedro, too, because Pedro would want him to enjoy his freedom, damn it. Mafia bosses did not give gifts they did not intend the receivers to enjoy. And this was way, way better than a Maserati. Or a mink coat. Or a diamond necklace. Or whatever mafiosos gave their mistresses—not that Peter was Pedro's mistress.

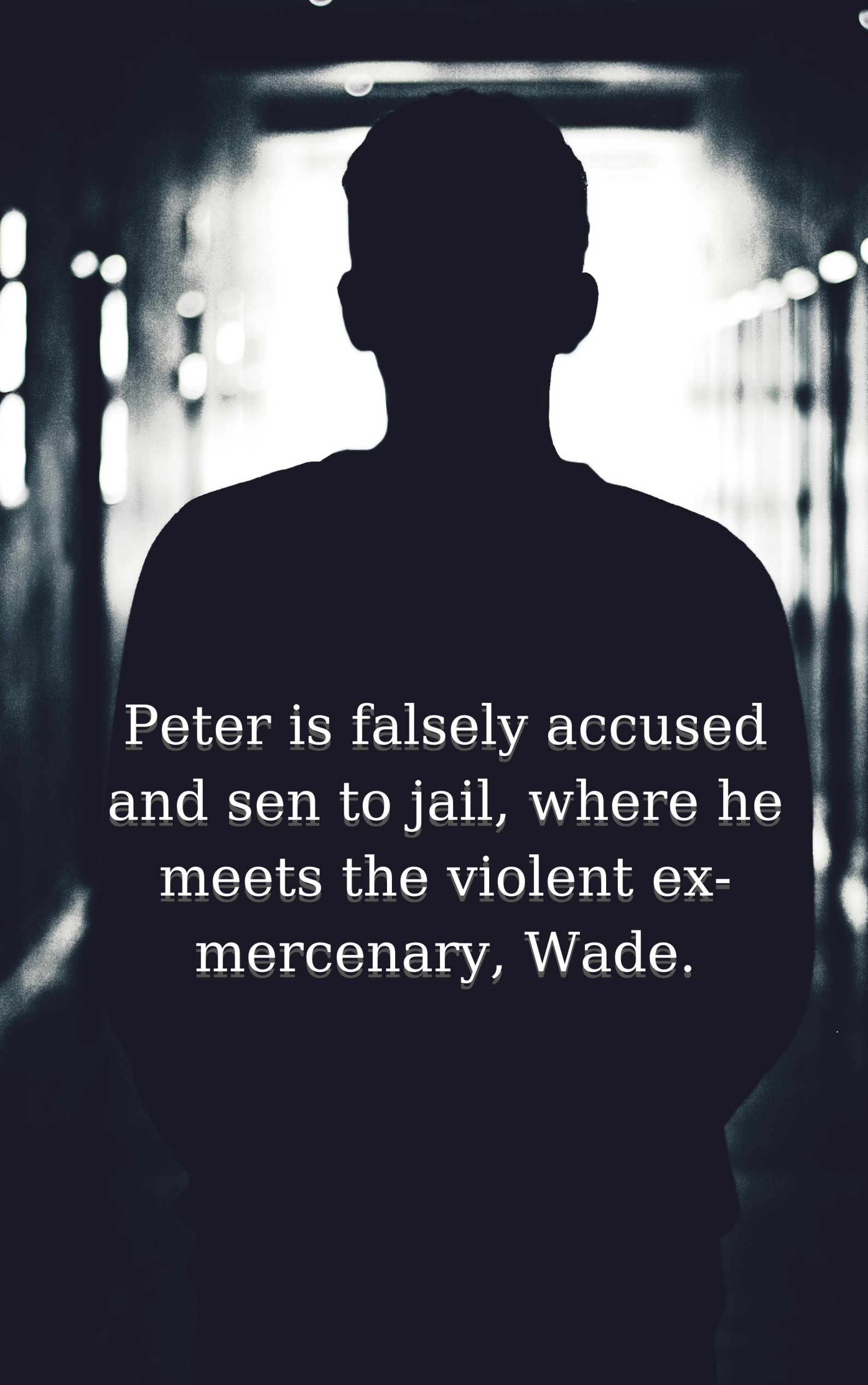
This? This was priceless.

This was *freedom*.

Peter was going to go out there and find Wade—or, more likely, let Wade find him—and then they would disappear together for the rest of their lives, to some distant island nation, where nobody would ever recognize them.

[There's one more scene of Peter enjoying freedom and Wade finding him, and then a messenger from Pedro arriving with identity documents and a safe, anonymous passage out of the country. Then there's a final epilogue with Peter and Wade in each other's arms, waking up in the morning together in some beautiful place (said island nation?), with Peter remembering how he'd fantasized about this with Wade in chapter 16, and now it was finally coming true!]

THE END. :D

A high-contrast, black and white image featuring the silhouette of a person from the back, standing in a dark tunnel. The tunnel's interior is lined with numerous small, bright lights that create a bokeh effect, illuminating the person's silhouette. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image, centered within the dark area of the person's torso.

Peter is falsely accused
and sen to jail, where he
meets the violent ex-
mercenary, Wade.